AGAINST THE GRAIN

Prema Goet

Against The Grain is a visual presentation on reality and myth, on material culture and much more. The traditions depicted herein, embedded in complex webs of cults and languages and enacted through the medium of ritual practices, are deeply rooted in science and spirituality. The ritual dimensions, born out of devotional attitudes towards a diverse host of deities, forces of nature, asceticism, life and death, society and its rejection, forms the core of this book. Here, myths, beliefs and ritual-objects are derived and reformulated from a multitude of over-lapping traditions in a seamlessly fluid relationship between material culture and what has been inscribed in the texts from within these cultures. This book, a multi-modal ethnographic undertaking, walks its audience through the myths and rites that attempt to grasp the meaning of nature and its ontological realities within our own space and time —in realms where ordinary human beings, gods, animals, objects, spirits and forces of nature communion with one another through performative ritual practices.

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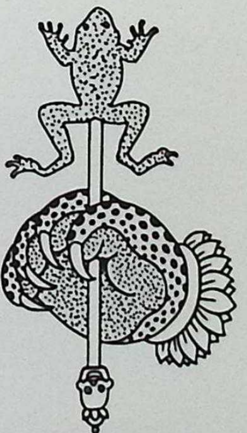

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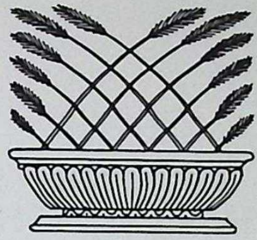


"I note that our philosophising youths, women and artists want philosophy to provide precisely the opposite of what the Greeks derived from it. A person who does not hear the constant joy which pervades every phrase and counter-phrase of a Platonic dialogue, the joy which celebrates the new discovery of rational thought – what does he understand of Plato or of ancient philosophy? The Greeks were intoxicated with dialectics, concepts, ideas, arguments, generalizations and refutations, an intoxication that reminds us of what the great composers of classical counterpoint must have felt... But our contemporaries do not wish to be looked upon as rational beings, they like to be exceptional souls, "intuitive natures" with "inner depth" and "intellectual vision." They want to be artistic, a genius in the head and a demon in the body, hence eligible for this world and the next, to which is added the divine prerogative of being obscure and unintelligible. And these are the kind of people that now do philosophy! I am afraid they will notice one day that they have made a mistake, that what they are looking for is religion!"

– Friedrich Nietzsche, Morgenröte 1881

Amongst the stories from the Chassidic sages of the past, there is an old but short parable that has always stuck with me. It goes as follows:

The king's star-gazer saw that the grain harvested that year was tainted. Anyone who would eat from it would become insane. "What can we do?" said the king. "It is not possible to destroy the crop for we do not have enough grain stored to feed the entire population."

"Perhaps," said the star-gazer, "we should set aside enough grain for ourselves. At least that way we could maintain our sanity." The king replied, "If we do that, we will be considered crazy. If everyone behaves one way and we behave differently, we will be considered the not normal ones. "Rather," said the king, "I suggest that we too eat from the crop, like everyone else. However, to remind ourselves that we are not normal, we will make a mark on our foreheads. Even if we are insane, whenever we look at each other, we will remember that we are insane!"

This short story is said to contain hidden Kabbalistic teachings. Although I do not know what these teachings are, it certainly makes me wonder about the possible reasons as to why anyone would come up with such a literary device in order to impart esoteric teachings onto a select few. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that the extant exegetical literature on this very story tell us that the king is G-d himself, and that the tainted grain may have been an allusion to ergot. Ergot is a dangerous type of fungus containing derivatives of lysergic acid such as ergoline alkaloids which, when they contaminate grains, apart from being trippy, can also cause gangrene and at times even death. But what seems strikingly interesting, at least to me, is that the King would be(come) aware of his own insanity – which seems to be a rare trait amongst those who experience permanent states of psychosis. And that the marks on their foreheads are just a reminder of that, that the mad-to-be would behave just like everyone else – except for that they would be aware of their mutual differences. Perhaps what the grand Chassidic master of the Breslov dynasty – Rabbi Nachman – meant in his eighteenth-century Ukrainian village of Uman was this: that G-d had agreed with his star-gazer, i.e., a devout mystic, to be insane whilst, in full knowledge of that fact, remaining living and functioning in society in the same way as most people but simultaneously and cynically aware of their unusual pact to one another. In this way, so it seems, the experience of reciprocal closeness and devotion – and that which isn't ordinarily "normal" would go hand-in-hand with divine madness and ecstatic experience. However, aside from the allegory of the tainted grain, which is a recursive topic in the present visual presentation, the question which permits no answer is what then would be the point in fitting in with the rest of society if one were to have a hotline to G-d whereby one could experience sheer transcendental madness and communion with the Divine?!

Divine madness, as a modern-day subject of anthropological, theological and phenomenological studies, has a long and rich history rooted in most, if not all, ancient societies. Modern studies about such subjects are, on one hand, less enshrouded in prejudice than their predecessors had been in the past but still lacking an openness to experimental practices on the other. In many of the scholastic fields, sub-fields and emerging alike, under the umbrella of social sciences, the subject of shamanic and ascetic practices – including but not confined to visions, divine madness, demonology, spirit possessions, healing, exorcisms etc – have at times been regarded as phenomena devoid of rational value or at best regarded as "superstitions" developed over a large span of time and space. In this short, yet mostly visual, presentation of human ritualia I propose introducing the viewers of *Against the Grain* to the subjects of my investigations, thereby disclosing the material cultures embedded in each of the images herein. And since, to some, the theoretical study of esoteric practices, particularly the more obscure ones, cannot be entirely and adequately analysed by rational means, I suggest that one must first immerse oneself in the irrational thought and experiences provided by religion for only then can one begin to make some sense of certain things. To this, I must add that my primary concern here is purely based on the representation of performative practices through the medium of multi-modal ethnographic undertakings and not on any of the other branches of human and social sciences such as philosophy, linguistics, history and the like.

The material and visual culture of ritual practices as presented through the images in this book seeks to introduce its viewers to certain aspects of what some scholars have described as the polythetic mode, a mode whereby membership in a class is determined by the possession of significant shared, and overlapping, properties. Such a definition of categorisation, particularly in relation to South Asian religious groups, can be helpful and simultaneously problematic – *Against the Grain* therefore attempts to demonstrate the fluid relationship between visual and cultural practices to what has been inscribed in texts from within the cultures at hand. And in doing so, I aim to shed some light onto how going against the societal grain — i.e., renouncing society, and engaging in what some perceive as anti-normative practices, while using grains as magical elements, symbolic or otherwise — can contribute to the understanding of ritual pluralism and its many overlaps. The sort of negotiated balance, entered into by the King with his star-gazer, whereby one functions in the same way as the rest of society while regarding oneself as apart from it — at least in the context of the domain of South Asian traditions and texts — has been emphasised perhaps most famously by the tantric text Śyāmārahasya — a śākta oriented text from the 16th century. For instance, "Inwardly Śāktas, outwardly Śaivas or in society nominally Vaiṣṇavas, the Kaulas assuming various forms, traverse the world." But perhaps most importantly this balance is indicated by the dichotomy between right-hand versus left-hand practices which pervades most religious orientations in the subcontinent. The former conforms to the stringency of brahminical orthodoxy, the latter seeks to transgress it — whilst yet not fully rejecting it, left-hand practices overlap with those of the right-hand. Left-hand rituals have always been associated with transgressive acts and practices in which the use of sexual fluids and other so-called impure items are used in order to propitiate and appease the ferocious deities and spirits. There are many historical reasons for this, for these competing forces have their own sets of rules, (un) fortunately all of which are beyond the scope and intent of this book. Should one wish to learn more details about the peculiarities about such traditions one could read The *Tantric Body, The Sacred Tradition of Hindu Religion* by Prof. Gavin Flood. However, one fact remains clear despite the overlaps between left and right-hand tantras, whether in mainstream popular practices or in localised and indigenous cultures: the usage of grains, and the going against the societal grain, appears to be a common factor amongst all the groups portrayed herein. To contextualise, the transgressive or so-called impure items used in some of these rituals are of five kinds, with the exception of a few regional variations shown later on these are: māṃsa (meat), matsya (fish), madya (wine) — or in some cases a liquor called varuṇī — mudrā (parched grain) and maithuna (sexual intercourse and consequently the substance, (dravya) produced from it). These are collectively called pañcamakāra, i.e., five items beginning with the letter *ma* in Sanskrit — and pañca meaning " five". In some texts the pañcamakāra is also referred to as pañcatattva (five truths/realities). There is however another kind of conceptualised pañcatattva portrayed in the last image of this book, which I shall return to at later point.

Before turning to each entry section of this book, let me point out that a large portion of the visual material presented herein was produced for the Śākta Traditions Research Programme at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. This innovative multi-modal research programme, led by Prof. Gavin Flood and Dr. Bjarne Wernicke-Olesen, seeks to trace developments in the history of Goddess worship among the brahminic orthopraxis, tantric traditions, and at village level. It aims at presenting an interdisciplinary survey of śākta history, practice and doctrines in its diversities as well as to convey something of the śākta religious imaginaire and ritual practices that distinct and sets Śāktism apart from other South Asian religious traditions.

The first set of eleven images in this book was taken during the Ajimā Jātrā celebrations at the periphery of the Naradevī temple complex in Kathmandu, Nepal. Naradevī is a fearsome female deity celebrated by the Newars, who view her as Śvetakālī or White Kālī. She is also regarded as another form of the goddess Cāmuṇḍā — an emaciated and ferocious Goddess. Ajimā (from Old Newar) is the name of a goddess who takes care of or protects children, also known as Devī, Bhagavatī, Hāratīmātā, Ajidyah, Ajimāju or Ākāśayoginī. There are eight main mother goddesses (Sanskrit: aṣṭamātṛkā) in the Newari pantheon - they represent the ancestral matriarchal deities of the Newars as well as the protectors of the ancient kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley. The Newars account for about five percent of the Nepalese population, and their traditions are deeply rooted in Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. In the tantric literature – especially in the Netra Tantra, a text which is currently being critically edited by by Prof. Flood and Dr. Bjarne Wernicke Olesen – the mātṛkās also represent entities which reside within one's physiological and (in the imagined) cosmological bodies. They, along with other classes of spirit entities such as: Śākinīs (shape-shifters) Dūṣikās, Cumbikās, Yakṣas, Yoginīs, Khecarīs etc, are responsible for one's physiological and spiritual up-keeping, causing and curing diseases, bringing spiritual insights as well as spirit possessions, driving away evil spirits and causing the depletion of one's vital energies. However, the mātṛkās celebratory parade originated in an agreement the Ajimās made as a consequence of an unusual deal between them and a Brahmin farmer who was said to have been an expert in tantra. The popular account, based solely on oral tradition, informs not just about how the parade came into being and what it is about but also relates the Ajimās to the tradition of the nine Durgās, popular throughout India. In short, the popular narrative concerning the story of Ajimās is as follows: The mātṛkās lived in a forest in Kathmandu valley, where they would often seize, kill and eat men and animals. The Brahmin farmer, versed in tantra, was able to capture them using mantras and the repetitive beating of a double-sided drum called ḍamaru – more or less the same kind of drum as shown in some of the images of the aghorīs in Kāmākhyā and the Tamang shamans presented later in this book. The farmer, once he had captured the mātṛkās, shrunk them, put them into a basket and took them home, where he secretly forced them to perform for him. The spell which bound them would be annulled if, and when, someone else other than the farmer himself came to know about or saw the basket with the shrunken Ajimās inside. The farmer had the basket locked in a room where no one else but himself would enter. One day, while the farmer was out of the house, the farmer's wife entered the room and the Ajimās escaped from the small basket and from the tantric spell which had bound them. Upon returning home and having found out what had happened, the Brahmin farmer pursued them – again with tantric mantras and the repetitive drumming of his double-sided ḍamaru. But by then, the Ajimās had just killed and eaten a pig - this made them unfit to re-enter the farmer's house. However, they made a deal: provided that the farmer would let them roam freely, the Ajimās agreed to make a public appearance once every twelve years in which they would perform various dramas (payāka) and receive the worship of the public. The performance of dramas during the Ajimā procession is not viewed as an enactment of the various tales told by the dances and hand gestures (mudrā) of the actors playing each Ajimā, but rather as the Ajimās themselves in flesh and bone. A select group of men from the Newar community are trained to be possessed by the mātṛkās. The process (sādhanā) and training for the possessed-to-be is long and complex, but only ultimately becomes conclusively completed when their masks – perhaps the most important of all ritual objects concerning the Ajimā parade – are worn. Each mātṛkā has their own mask, these are kept within the temple complex and out of public sight for twelve years. These masks are considered non-different from each of the goddesses themselves and full possession takes place only when one is ritually prepared to wear them. Throughout the Ajimā celebration, offerings are made to the goddesses and to the tutelary deity of the Naradevī temple, the Goddess Kālī. Devotees bring offerings of pañcamakāra – usually in metal vessels – and animals are ritually slaughtered at the end of the celebrations in an attempt to appease the blood-thirsty mātṛkās. In an early variant concerning Luti Ajimāṃ (one of the Goddesses), a list is given which differs drastically from the types of animals sacrificed at the Naradevī. In the early list, fish, sparrows, grasshoppers and snakes are ritually sacrificed. However, here the *ma* for the maithuna element is an internalised abstract object of the mind rather than a physical substance. As mentioned before, the pañcamakāra, at least in parts, is a recursive motif throughout this book. Only some of the Ajimās are portrayed here, these are: Siṃhinī the lioness, Indrāyaṇī, Vaiṣṇavī and Vyāghriṇī the tigress.

The next set of thirty-five images starting after the passage from the Kubjikā Tantra are of two different groups of tantrics in Kāmākhyā, in the Northeastern state of Assam in India. The first set of seven images depicts a small group of individuals practicing śmaśām sādhanā (cremation ground practices) in which one's own blood is offered to one of the fierce forms of the Goddess, e.g. Kubjikā, Cāmuṇḍā, Ugratārā et al. In the first image it is possible to see the needle of a syringe inserted into the hand of one of the practitioners. His blood is drawn and then poured onto the five sacrificial fires inside small clay pots with incense. Along with the offerings of blood, grains, semen and alcohol, other substances are also offered. This cremation ground is adjacent to the Kāmākhyā temple complex on the top of a hill called Nilachal (Blue Mount), next to the city of Guwahati. Kāmākhyā is not just a place of pilgrimage in the ancient kingdom of Kāmarūpa, the Land of Desire (modern-day Assam and parts of its borders) but also the earthly and geographical embodiment of the Goddess herself – or in this particular case the embodiment of the Goddess' sexual organ – in which her ephemeral and eternal śakti resides. The hill also houses various smaller shrines pertaining to the cult of ten mahāvidyās – ten goddesses of great wisdom. The myth concerning its history is quite complex and varied but the main core of it, found in the Assamese medieval text Kālikā Purāṇa, can be summarised in a few sentences. The Goddess Satī, beloved of Śiva, was the daughter of the prajāpati Dakṣa. Dakṣa had organised a fire-sacrifice (yajña) but had not invited neither his daughter nor his son-in-law. Dakṣa considered Śiva to be unworthy of attending the function, for he led a rather unorthodox and antinomian way of life. Satī, on hearing that she was not welcome at her own father's function became overwhelmed with grief and took her own life. Śiva, who had a unique way of going about things, was not just deeply sad with the physical death of his beloved one but was also exceedingly angry with his father-in-law. He went to Dakṣa's yajña and destroyed it, poured semen onto the sacrificial fire and chopped Dakṣa's head off – which got stuck to Śiva's fingernail (this head was later replaced by the head of a goat). Śiva then took Satī's corpse and roamed around with it on his back. Viṣṇu was asked to help sort out the situation. He came and threw his disk (a weapon called the sudarśanacakra), chopping Satī's body into many pieces and thereby putting an end to Śiva's misery. Parts of the dismembered Goddess fell on earth, and where they fell became places of pilgrimage called śākta-pīṭhas – places where the Goddess' śakti is physically present. There are many such places in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, each representing different parts of the Goddess' body. The list of places varies between 51 and 108. For instance, Tārā pīṭha in West Bengal, is considered to be where the Goddess' feet fell on earth, therefore the shrine there bears not just the idol of Tārā – with her tongue sticking out – but a pair of feet separate from the body and a concealed image of Śiva sucking on Tārā's breast. Kāmākhyā is considered to be the place where the Goddess' genital organs fell on earth, and it is there that there is a temple dedicated to her yoni (the Goddess' sexual organ). Once a year the Goddess – in her yoni form – is said to menstruate, and her period is marked by an important Assamese festival called Ambuvācī Melā. During the Goddess' menstruation, her temple is closed as thousands of śākta tantrics, pilgrims, peddlers and street performers gather around its surrounding areas. The picturesque, but over-crowded, tropical rainforest hill is home to a shrine to the Goddess and to a few wild tigers, who in 2019 made headlines for disfiguring a man just a day prior to the festival. While the temple remains closed to the public during the Goddess three-day menstruation period, various offerings are made by the priestly bunch who run the temple. Curiously, Kāmākhyā is worshipped by both left and right-hand tantrics. Once her period is over, the temple re-opens and the devotees eagerly fight over the substances which form her menstrual discharge in the form of prasādam – a vermilion liquid mineral laced with sacrificial blood and small pieces of the fabric which had enshrouded her idol inside the temple, these are considered by many to contain magical properties and healing powers.

The second set of twenty-eight images starting after the two young street demons (rākṣasas) up until the next set of images starting from an egg on a drum, depicts a different group of tantrics in Kāmākhyā – a group of śākta aghorīs from Tamil Nadu. This group is led by the Kāpālika Aghorī Manikandan, to whom I am eternally grateful. They too attend the annual menstruation of the Goddess and it is there that they perform their own variant of the yoni pūjā at the cremation grounds. The yoni pūjā of the so called left-hand (vāma) path is quite different from the more normative right path. Their rituals are not all that straightforward in the sense that they involve complex sets of acts and a fairly large number of people (over the years that I have visited Kāmākhyā I have seen twenty, twenty five and as many as fifty) each serving their own unique function, seemingly mixing tribal shamanism with spirit possession, healing, etc. while mimicking prescriptive Vedic rituals, i.e., with different sets of acts divided into various parts and carried out by various ritual officiants. The triple-layered triangular-shaped clay construction on the ground – the yoni of the Goddess – which is a temporary construction, serves as a portal through which the various offerings are poured and as the gateway through which one may traverse back and forth to the realm of the Goddess and other spirit entities. From it, the Goddess, and various subordinate entities, such as yoginīs, khecarīs, mātṛkās et al come and seize the body of one (or more) of the ritual officiants. The latter thus becomes possessed and the Goddess herself then symbolically consumes the various offerings, such as alcohol, grains, fruits, and sacrificial animals and of course, the yonitattva produced from the maithuna. In the past, up until 100–150 years ago, such a ritual would have involved human sacrifice but this practice was officially banned at some point during the colonial British empire. This group of śākta aghorīs have recently allied themselves with members of the Kinnara Akhara (a religious order of transgender sādhus headed by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi) whereas prior to this allegiance there were participation of Hijras. Their participation in the rituals seems to be quite peripheral, in the sense that only males have an active role during the pūjā. However, their participation in it is nevertheless vital for the production of the substance of maithuna. It is through an alchemical transformation that some of these kinnaras, along with their male counterparts, produce the dravya (substance) for the offerings. I have been informed that this came into being because of a historical disruption and loss in the lineage of Kaula women and that this process is done through vajrolīmudrā – a process whereby a man draws up the woman's sexual fluid through one's penis. However, I have never witnessed this.

The following seventeen images, starting with a duck-egg on a drum, were taken during the Janai Pūrṇimā celebrations (on the full moon day of the bright fortnight of the month Śrāvaṇa) in Gosāiṅkuṇḍa. Gosāiṅkuṇḍa – a Himalayan glacial lake (kuṇḍa) located 4800 metres above sea level – is about 10 or so odd kilometres away from the borders of Chinese occupied Tibet. The arduous 7 hour bus journey from Kathmandu to where the road ends takes one as far as Dunche, a small mountain village with 600 plus houses spread across the rugged landscape. From there hiking to Gosāiṅkuṇḍa must be done on foot - or on the back of a horse if one is unable to walk or just lazy. Some areas of this track are as steep as 70 degrees in inclination and acclimatisation can take as long as one week. In this journey I was accompanied by my sound-engineer Jux Curtis, two Nepalese friends we made on the way, Pramod Gurung and Tu Zan Dulal - and a stray dog who tagged along with us for a large part of the journey. Fortunately – or not – this dog wasn't like the one who followed Yudhiṣṭhira after the battle of Kurukṣetra had ended. The kuṇḍa of Gosāi, where the celebrations take place, is particularly important in the cult of Śiva and his female counterpart. The mythology concerning the formation of the glacial lake, its significance and the type of practices observed there inform about transformation and shamanistic healing based on syncretic cults. The local tradition teaches that the kuṇḍa was formed by Śiva who, in desolation from the separation from his goddess and with oceanic poison (kālakūṭa) stored in his throat, went up to that region in search of healing herbs. As a prelude to this, the well-known myth about the churning of the ocean – the samudra manthana – where Śiva drank the poison, is a story about creation by means of chaos whereby gods and demons cooperated with one another for the mutual benefit of producing the nectar of immortality, the amṛta. The basic component of this myth is that the churned ocean waters were transmuted into various elixirs: human milk, clarified butter (for the sacrificial fire) and ambrosia or soma, as well as into the opposite of all elixirs – poison – before they turned into the nectar of immortality. The aftermath of this, where Śiva drank the poison, and thus became known as Nīlakaṇṭha or the blue-throated "one", is what relates the lake to the myth of the churning of the ocean.

The local belief is that Śiva's sojourn in the region caused the creation of the lake. The traditions hold that Śiva threw his trident against the rocky mountain and water sprang forth from it, thereby forming the lake now known as Gosāiṅkuṇḍa. The waters of what became the lake were what healed his poisoned blue-throat. However, the religious syncretism of this region involves Buddhism, the Tibetan pre-Buddhist Bön cult — which some have called it the "nameless religion" — and local shamanism mostly based on the animistic beliefs of the Tamang people. The images here are mostly about them and the material culture pertaining to them. The Tamang people, like the Newars, also account for more or less five per cent of the Nepalese population. Most of the Tamang shamans, known as jhākrīs or dhāmīs, place Padmasambhava at the centre of their beliefs and start their rites with a prayer to Śiva. Some of these jhākrīs are depicted here along with some of their own variant of pañcamakāra. To the Tamangs, the egg of a duck, also an important item amongst the Tantric Newars, is considered akin, or even superior to, the maṃsā (meat) of a goat as well as the element of maithuna — which is also said to be an abstract object of the mind that ought to be visualised through the process of meditation. A description of this meditative visualisation, and its function, obviously goes beyond the scope of what I purport to give here but the material culture pertaining to them can be seen and described. A human bone, as shown in one of the images, is used as a wind instrument as the substitute for matsya since mountain people hardly ever see any fish. In some early textual sources large birds and even humans would be part of the offering but this practice seems to have died out or is now kept a secret. For the jhākrīs and practitioners of Bön, shamanic initiation at Gosāiṅkuṇḍa, specially during the Janai Pūrṇimā, involves marching half-circle around of the lake on a path which leads one towards the water spring where Śiva had thrusted his trident against the rocks. This marching is done with the egg on a double-sided drum with rice and herbs atop of it. There rests a small shrine dedicated to the Goddess, but with no visible imagery. Although no physical images, or even symbolic hints, of female divinity are present in this vicinity it is nevertheless understood that the female divine presence, like in other śākta pīṭhas, resides therein. The jhākrīs, with their egg, then march back from the water-spring to another shrine which sits in front of the lake. Nandī, the bull which Śiva rides over, is depicted here as a small rabbit-like object over which the jhākrīs invoke the forces of nature. There the duck-egg is placed, inside of a shrine which houses a trident. This egg-trident union is Śiva Śakti. Furthermore, the kuṇḍa itself is an object of veneration - offerings of variants of pañcamakāra are placed in its waters by mountain folks and lay pilgrims in general. The sacred bathing, specially during the Janai Pūrṇimā, is considered an all-purifying rite which ends the vicious cycle of life and death.

The sequence of images beginning with an altar of the triad idols of God Rāma, Goddess Sītā and Rāma's brother, Lakṣmaṇa, depicts various ascetics from a number of Vaiṣṇava sects. These men are mostly from the Rāmānandī Saṃpradāya. This Saṃpradāya, arguably one of the largest among all Indian ascetic orders, is historically linked with the Śrī Saṃpradāya — with its pāñcarātric cult of Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa. However, in the Rāmānandī system, the Goddess Lakṣmī or Śrī of pāñcarātric cult is identified with Goddess Sītā — or the parāśakti who is temporarily usurped by the evil Rāvaṇa. Rāmānandīs trace their lineage back to the sage Rāmānanda — a Vaiṣṇava charismatic guru associated with the bhakti movement who lived in the fifteenth century. Rāmānanda's followers are amongst some of the renunciant sādhus who practice the fire penance ritual — a form of tapasyā known as dhuni or pañcāgni tap. This process, which starts on the fifth lunar day of the bright fortnight of Magh (February—March) and ends on Gangādaśehrā (the tenth lunar day of the bright fortnight of Jyesth, May—June) is attested not just in the Rāmāyaṇa — a sixth—seventh century BCE Indian epic — but also in other textual and epigraphical sources. The performance of this form of ritualistic penance may vary from individual to individual but its basic prescriptive modes consist of meditative practices along with mantra recitation, the usage of mudrās, prāṇāyāma breath retentions, offerings of grains to the fire god and some yogic āsanas, whilst one sits inside a small circle of burning fire. The idea behind it is to unify three fires: the fire of the sun, the fire of the burning fire and the fire generated in the body through the process of tapasyā. This practice is said to enable one to cultivate detachment from the body, to obtain a vision (darśana) of God and also to acquire yogic supernatural powers known as siddhis. The whole process is cyclical and lasts for a full eighteen years. In simple terms, this eighteen year-long process has six steps consisting of three years each. For the first three years, during the time of the year mentioned and during the hottest time of the day, one ought to sit inside a "consecrated" circle, demarcated on the ground by five piles of burning cow-dung and an etched circle, made with a chiṃtā – a multi-purpose tongs made of metal. The amounts, and sequences, of fires to be added after this initial period are as follows: after the first three years the burning piles are to be increased from five to seven; at the end of the sixth year of practice the yogīn should increase it to twelve piles; after nine years, the number of piles should be increased to eighty-four, then after another three years of practicing with eight-four burning piles, the yogīn sits inside a full circle of fire. The final stage is added after another three years – in which the yogīn sits inside a full circle of burning cow-dung and places a clay pot filled with burning cow-dung on their heads. However, despite all the performative variations, with various āsanas also performed at the end of the practice, there is a consistent pattern of ritual acts at the beginning of the practice - this aims at consecrating the area of the tapasyā and at 'calling on' deities through several mudrās. Furthermore, the bhutaśuddhi (a bodily purification through the process of nyāsa – whereby the mental deconstruction of one's physical body and the re-construction of it into a cosmic one) is defied by the relationship of subject and object through mantras and visualisations. In this system, mantras are living entities which can shield (kavaca) and command the population of spirit entities which resides within one's body. This may have inconsistent patterns, as this is dependent on various factors such as the types of sādhanā practiced, the disciplic lineage one may come from or simply on one's spiritual inclinations.

The final sequence of sixteen images, beginning with *Man Creating G-d* and ending with the bathing ceremony of the pair of mūrtis Gaura and Nitayānanda is, for lack of a better word, more or less a mosaic of street-photography with no particular theme. This sequence, with dancers, peddlers, and some daśanāmī saṃnyāsīs, ends with a dual form of the divine based on a conceptualised pañcatattva theme. This conceptual form of pañcatattva is analogous to its left-hand counterpart, except that here it is the divine who simultaneously embodies five different persons – two of whom are represented here. The idols of Gaura and Nitai, in the final image, are Caitanya and Nityānanda respectively. Caitanya, also known as Mahāprabhu, is perceived by his followers to be the binary manifestation of both the God Kṛṣṇa and the Goddess Rādha in one person. In a previous incarnation, these two were considered one – Rādha was Kṛṣṇa's own energy and power of pleasure – the hlādinī śakti – although they occupied two distinct bodies. Caitanya's biographer, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, takes this incarnation to be of two kinds, or having two main purposes: esoteric and exoteric. Exoterically, Caitanya, who takes up the role of a devotee, promotes devotional practices – and with some civil disobedience and lots of music – leads his bhakti movement. Esoterically he descends in order to experience Rādha's love for Kṛṣṇa – who is none other than himself. Nityānanda, one of the five tattvas depicted here, is Kṛṣṇa's expansion in combination with Balarāma – or Sankarśana who in the pāñcarātric cult is Viṣṇu's giant serpent. The remaining three, who are not depicted here, are: Advaitācarya, who is a combination of Viṣṇu and Śiva (Harihara); Śrīvāsa Ṭhākura, or Kṛṣṇa's devotee; and Gadadhāra Paṇḍita – Kṛṣṇa's internal śakti (the Goddess in a different ontological form). This cult, śākta in essence, has traversed not just South Asia but indeed large parts of the globe. Just as the sixteenth century Śyāmārahasya (previously mentioned) had described the fluidity of its adherents external orientations, this form of Vaishnavism from West-Bengal has taken up many forms, some less conservative than others. One particular feature of this manifold tradition of five hundred or so odd years is the enactment of the Divine couple's activities through an aestheticised, and self-induced emotion akin to the ideas of the *Theatre of Cruelty* – but whereupon the goal of the *rasa* is to transport the audience into another parallel and cosmic reality.

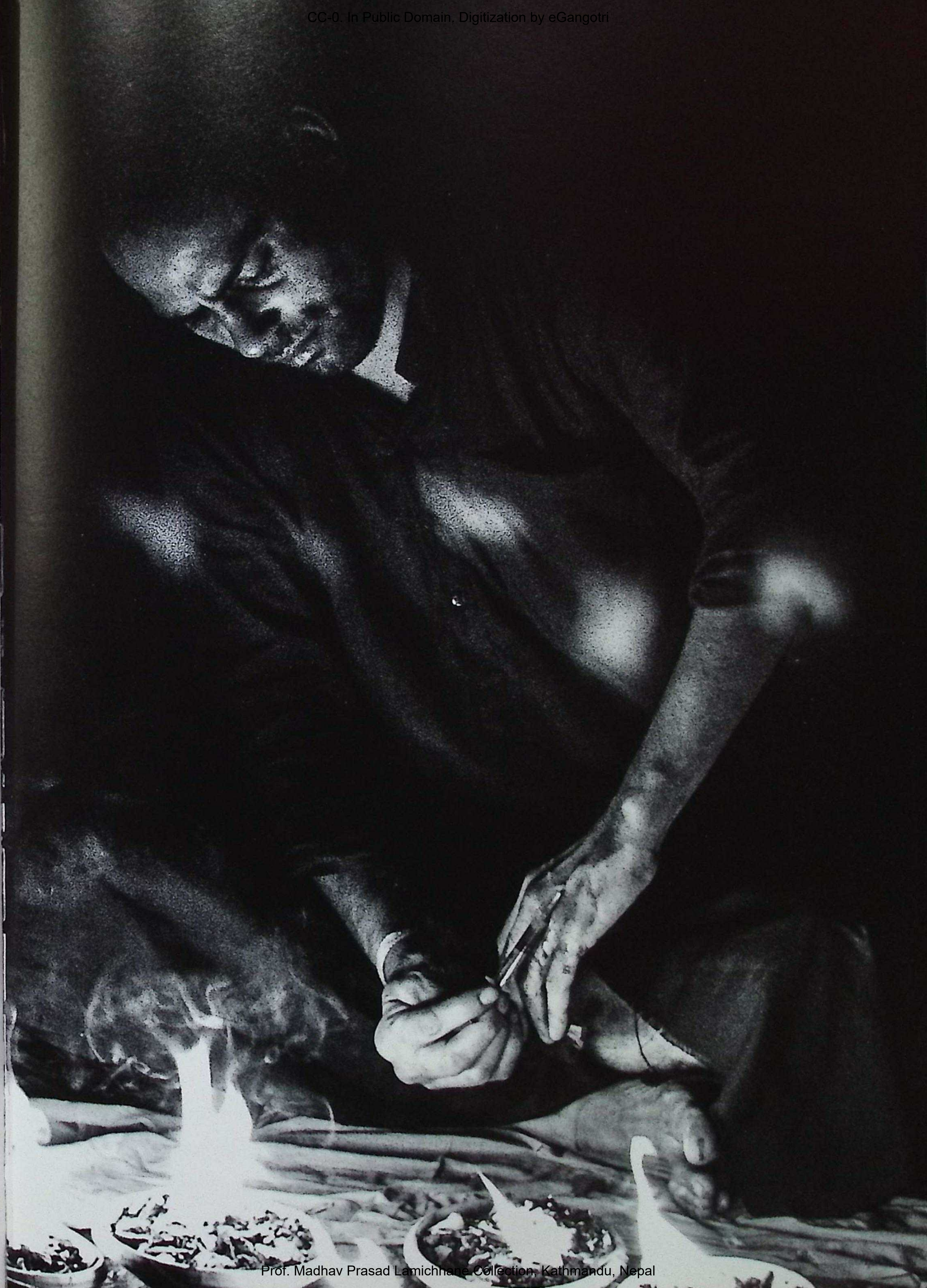
- *Prema Goet*

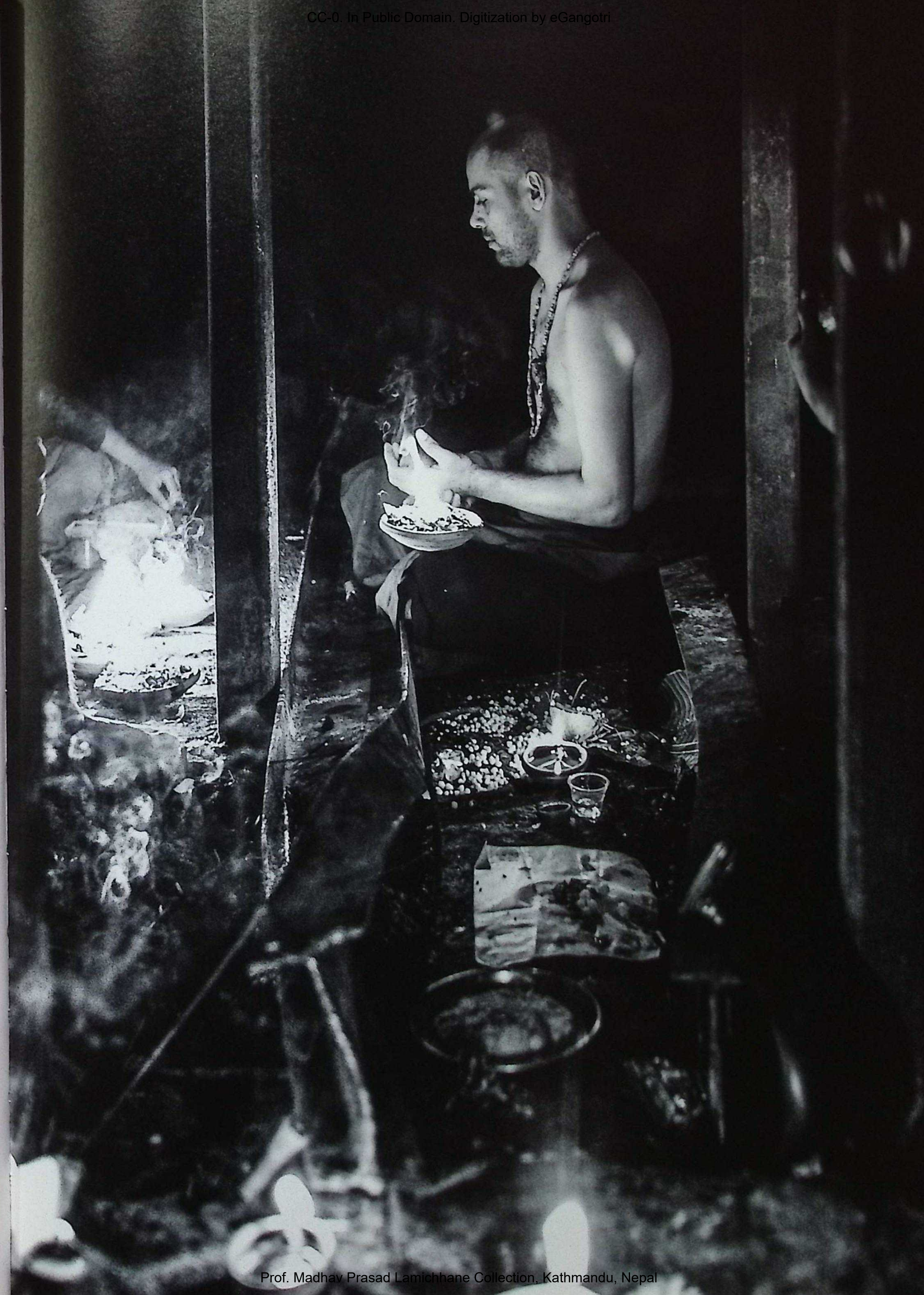
"[Once the group of deities] have been summoned through mantras, with strong faith and devotion one ought to satisfy them with flowers, liquor and offerings of incense. The Śakti, the Nāda and other [deity] mantras must first be satisfied with liquor, meat and blood at the beginning, [and then] only afterwards they should be [appeased] with flowers, incense etc."

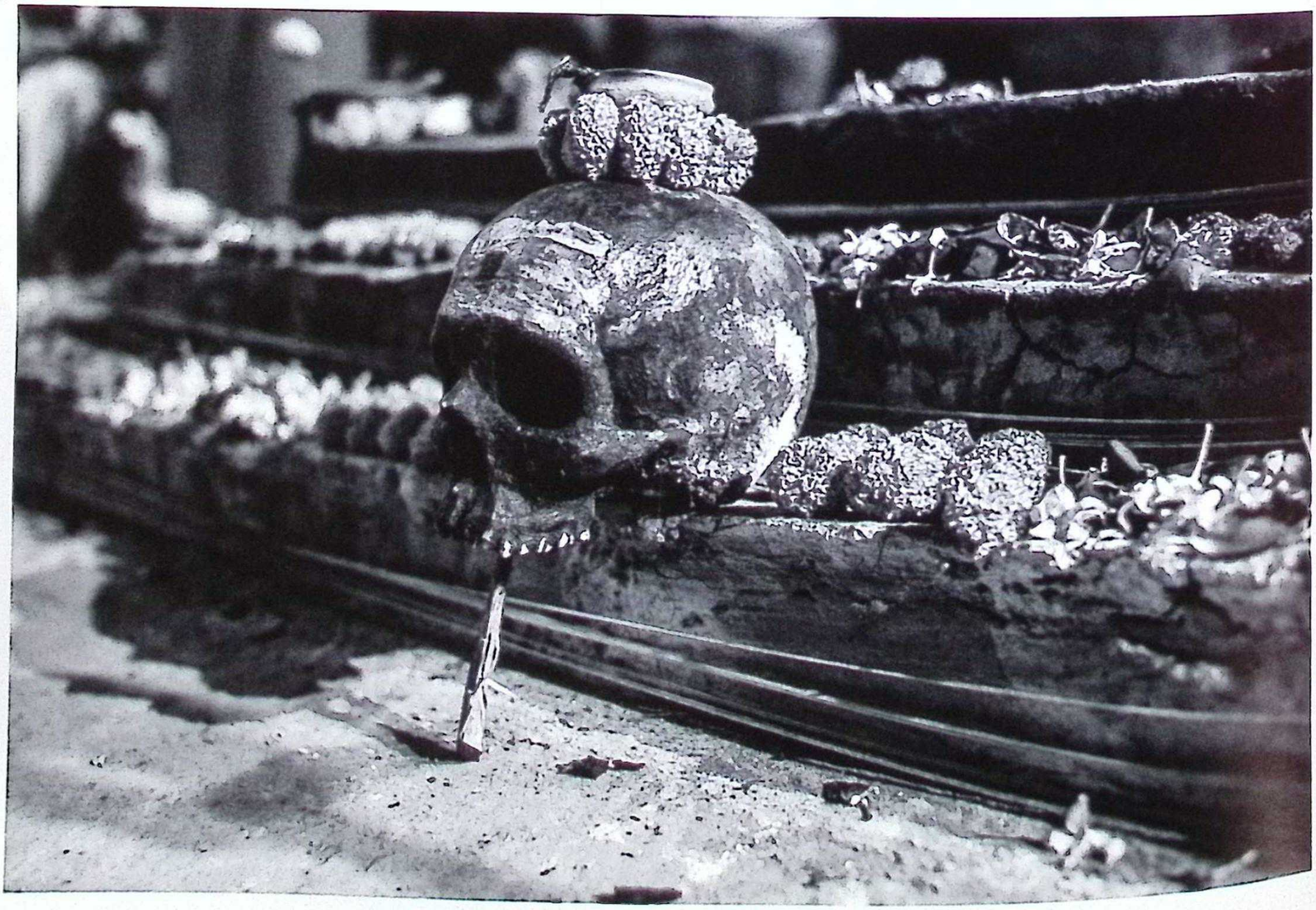
– *Tantrāloka 26:51b-53a*

"Having approached the forest, one should make an auspicious red maṇḍala and a ṣatkona (six-pointed figure) there. There one should worship the terrifying [form] of the goddess beginning with Yakṣiṇī and ending with Ḍāmarī. The wise should identify oneself with Kusuminī and should establish oneself in the middle [of the ṣatkona]. One should worship [them] with pieces of one's own flesh. One should offer a reception-bowl of [his own] blood; drawn from the eight organs (I.e.; hands, breast, forehead, eyes, throat, middle of the back, knees and feet) together with faeces and urine along with some liquor, one should mix it with the female and male fluids drawn from a black-clothed [person]. Then one should worship [the terrifying goddess] with the offerings of one's own bodily fluids (chyle, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow and semen). One should place the bowl of blood separately [and] divide the blood-bowl and the offerings individually. During this period, incenses [should be] prepared in other pots, these incenses should be placed together near the proximity of the skull bowl."

— *Kubjikā Tantra 23.132-137*

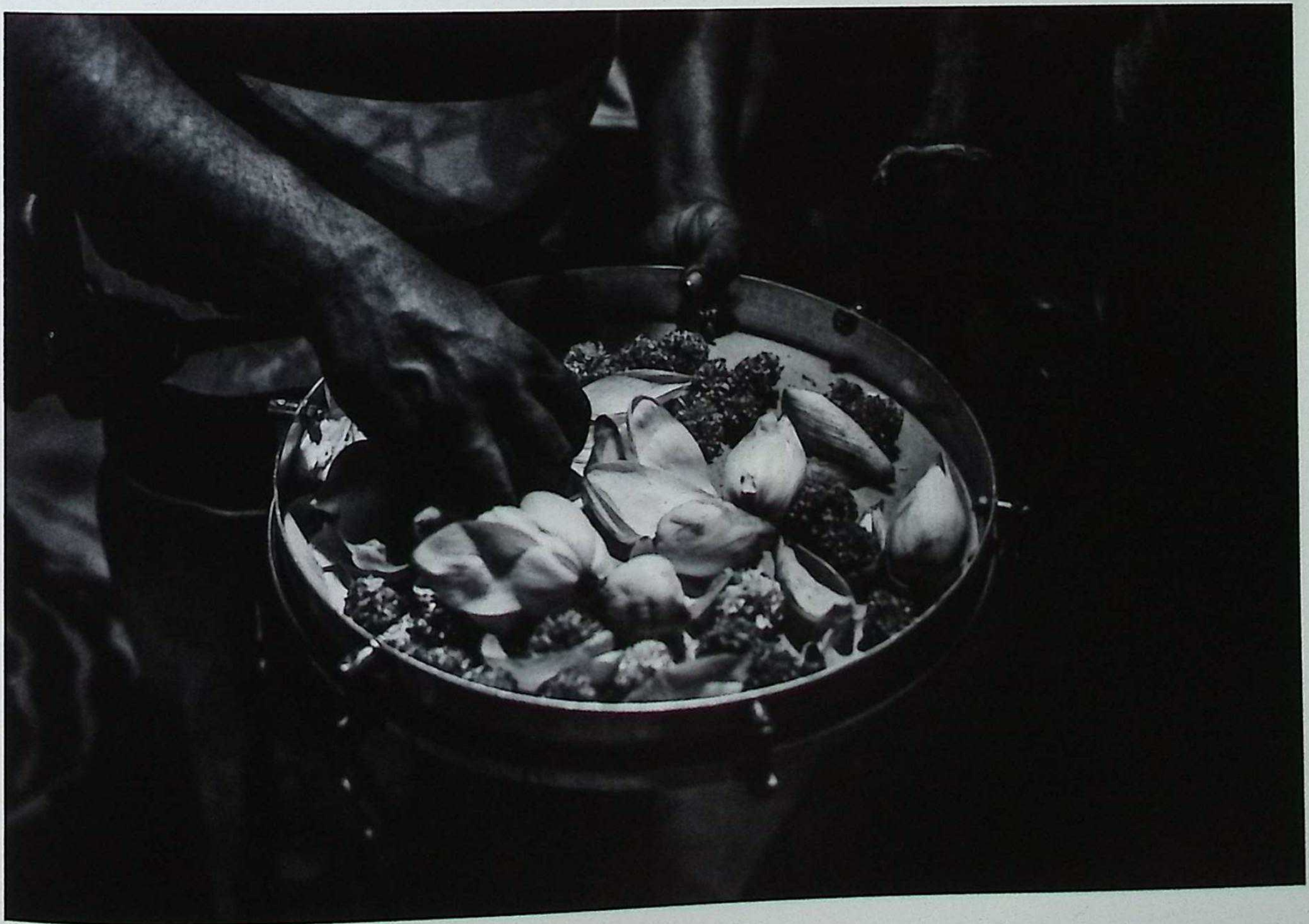


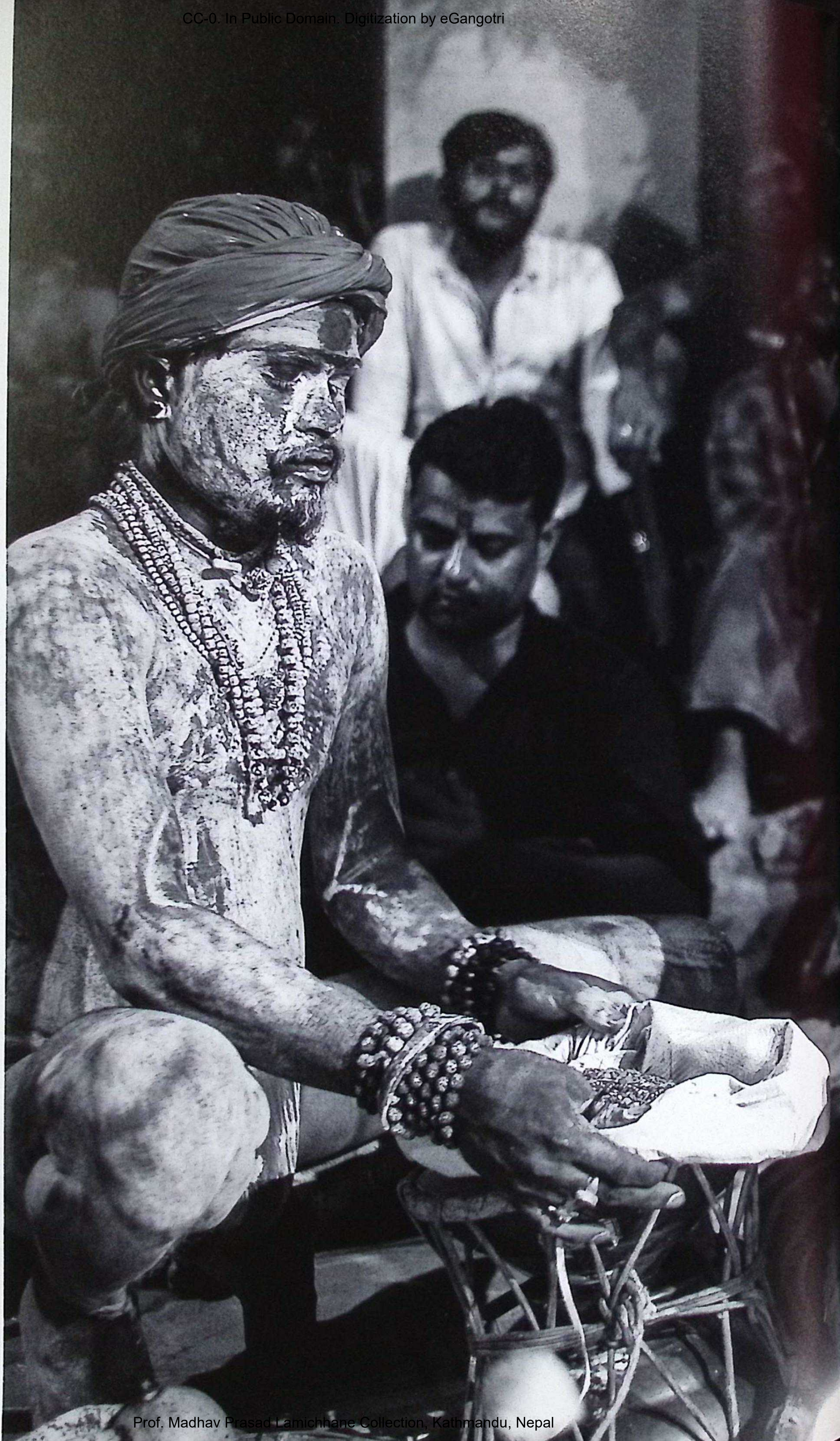


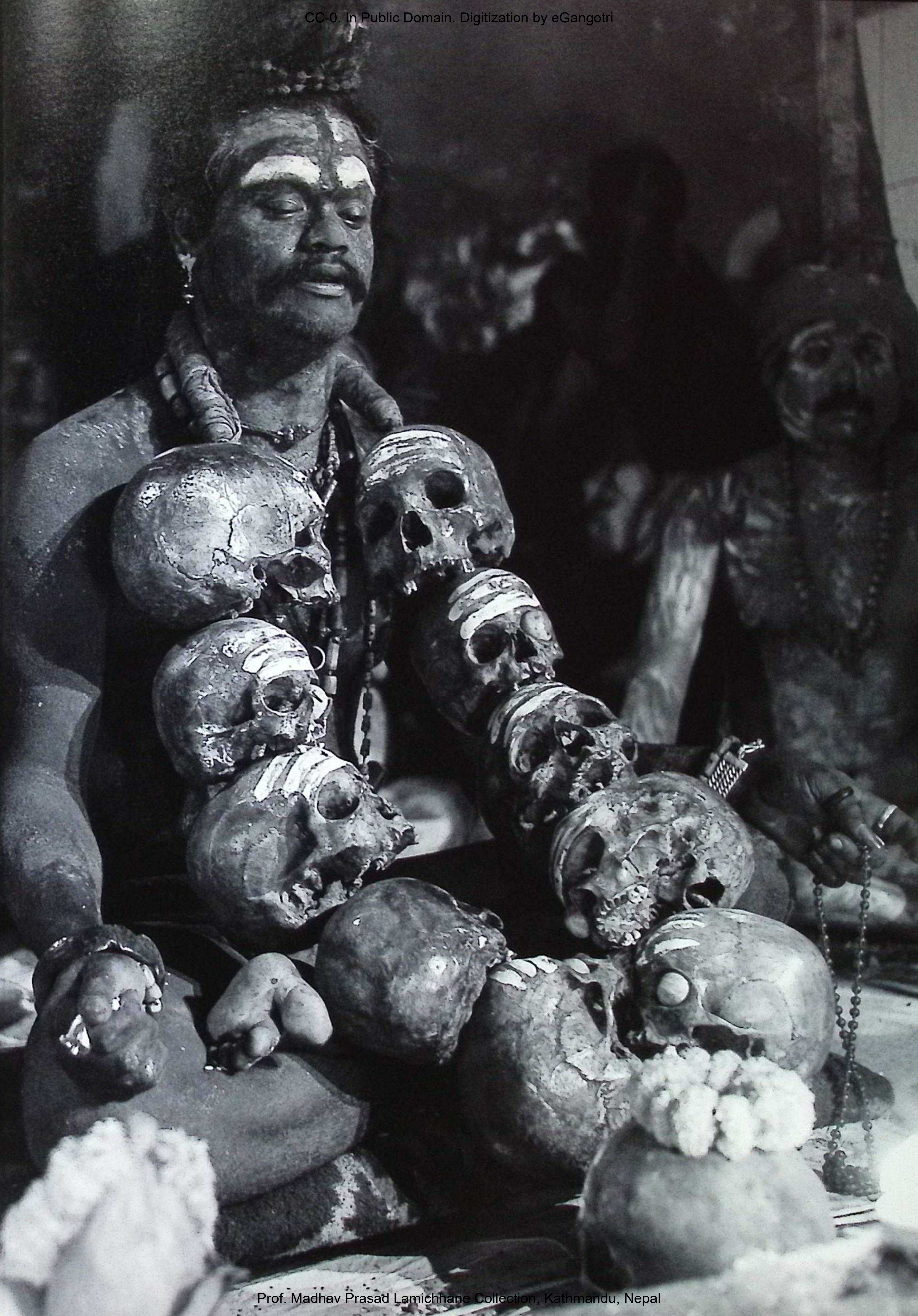


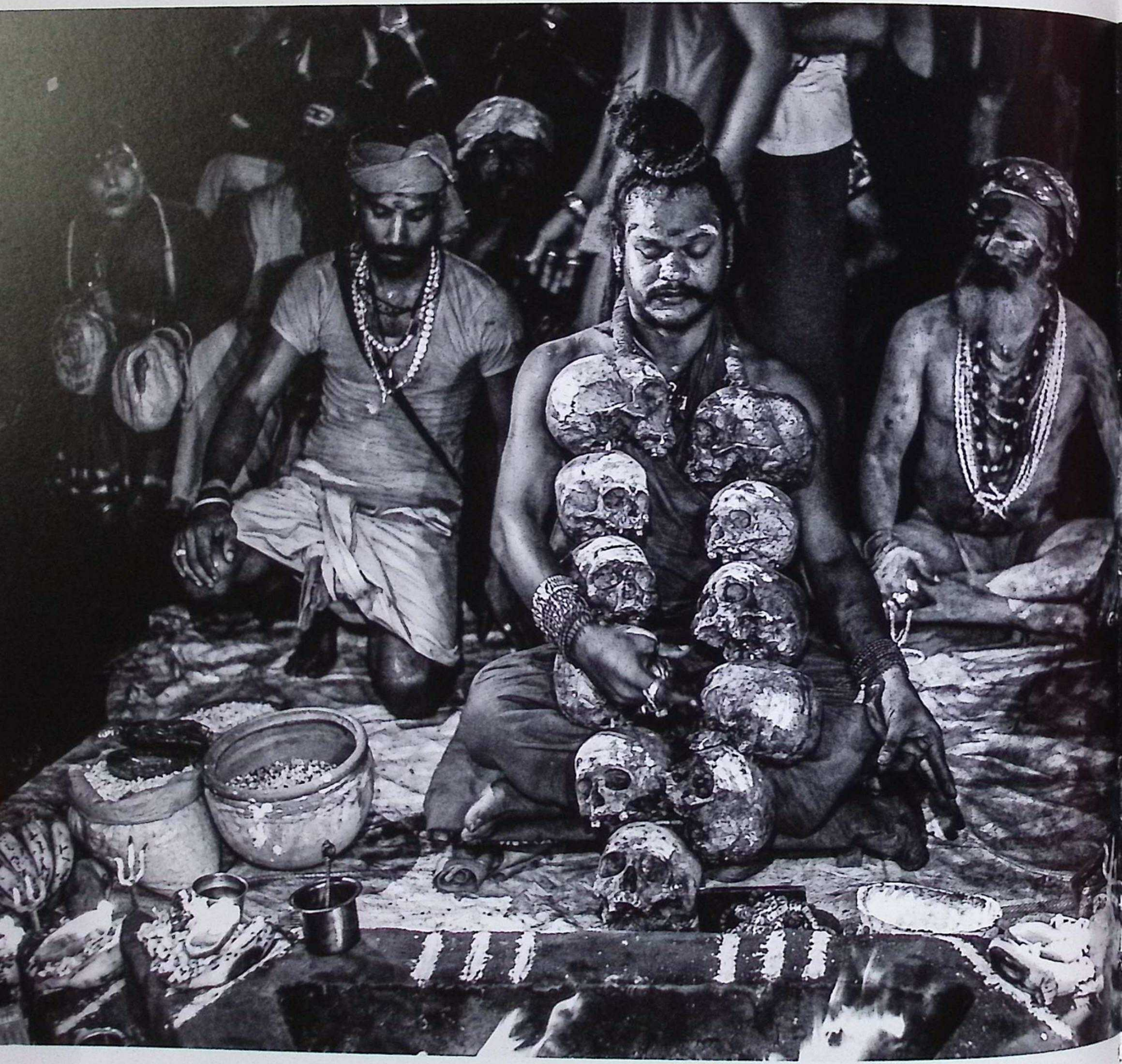
"Now hear [about] the oferings which are dear to the Goddess and Her female companions (śākinī); flesh, vuka-fowers, śiva-water, blood, semen and liquor."

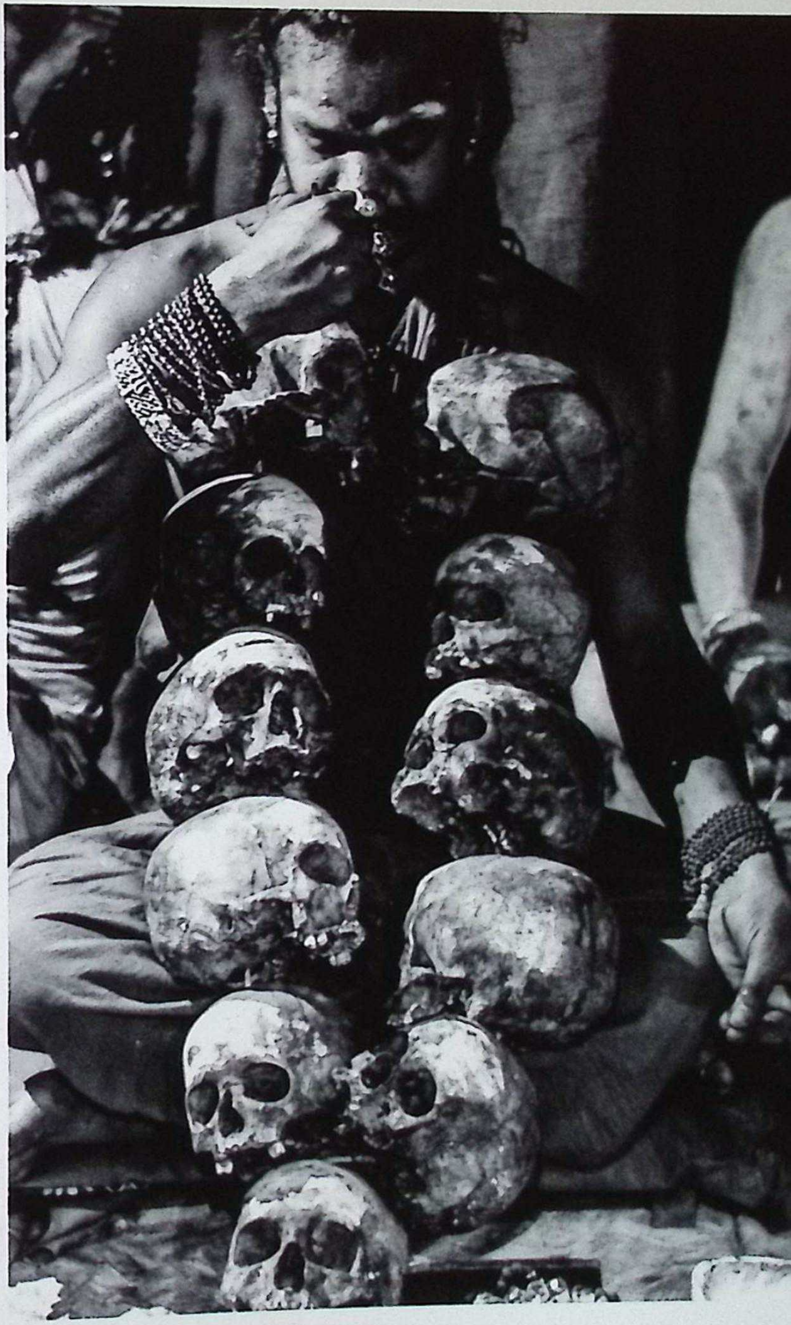
— *Kaulajñānanirṇaya 11.32-3*

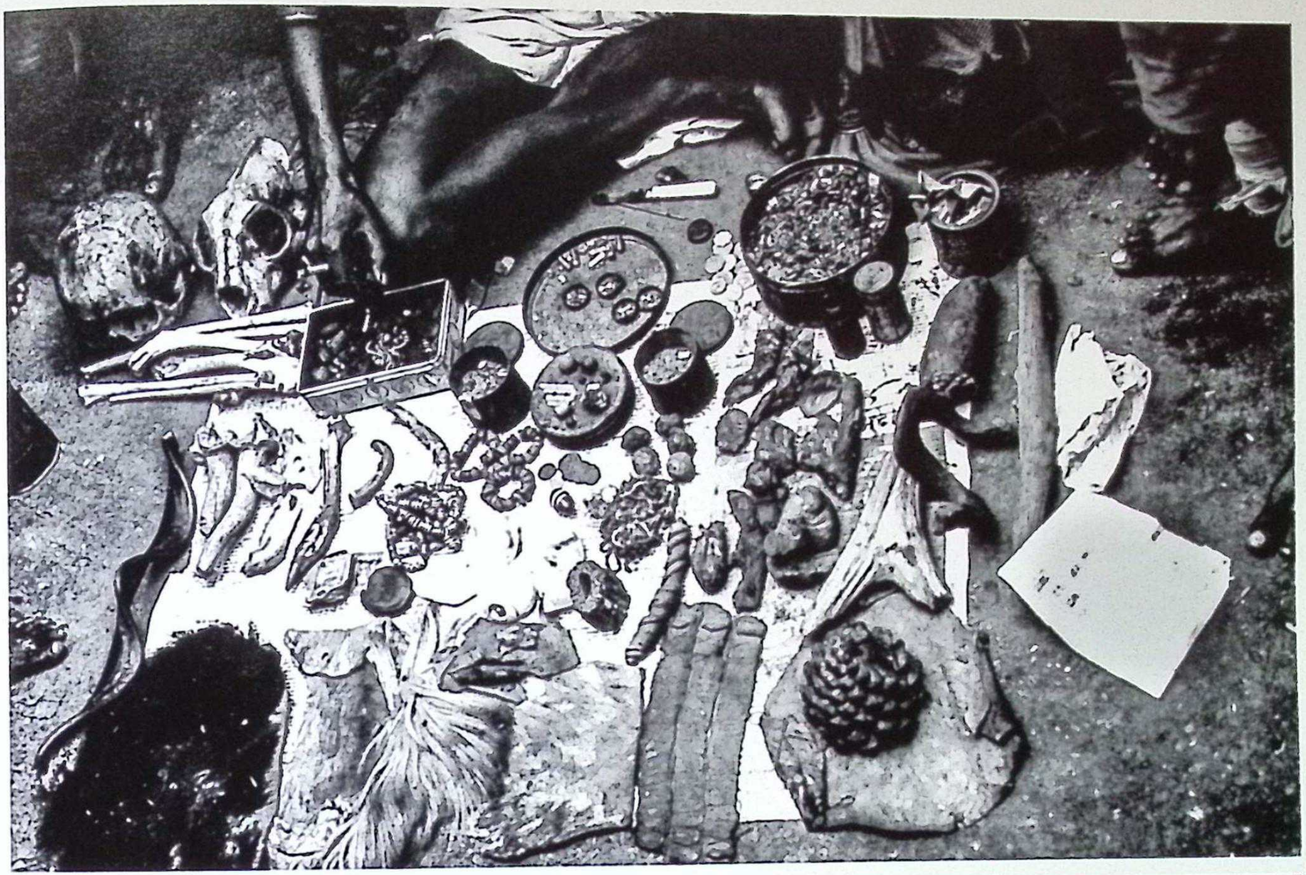


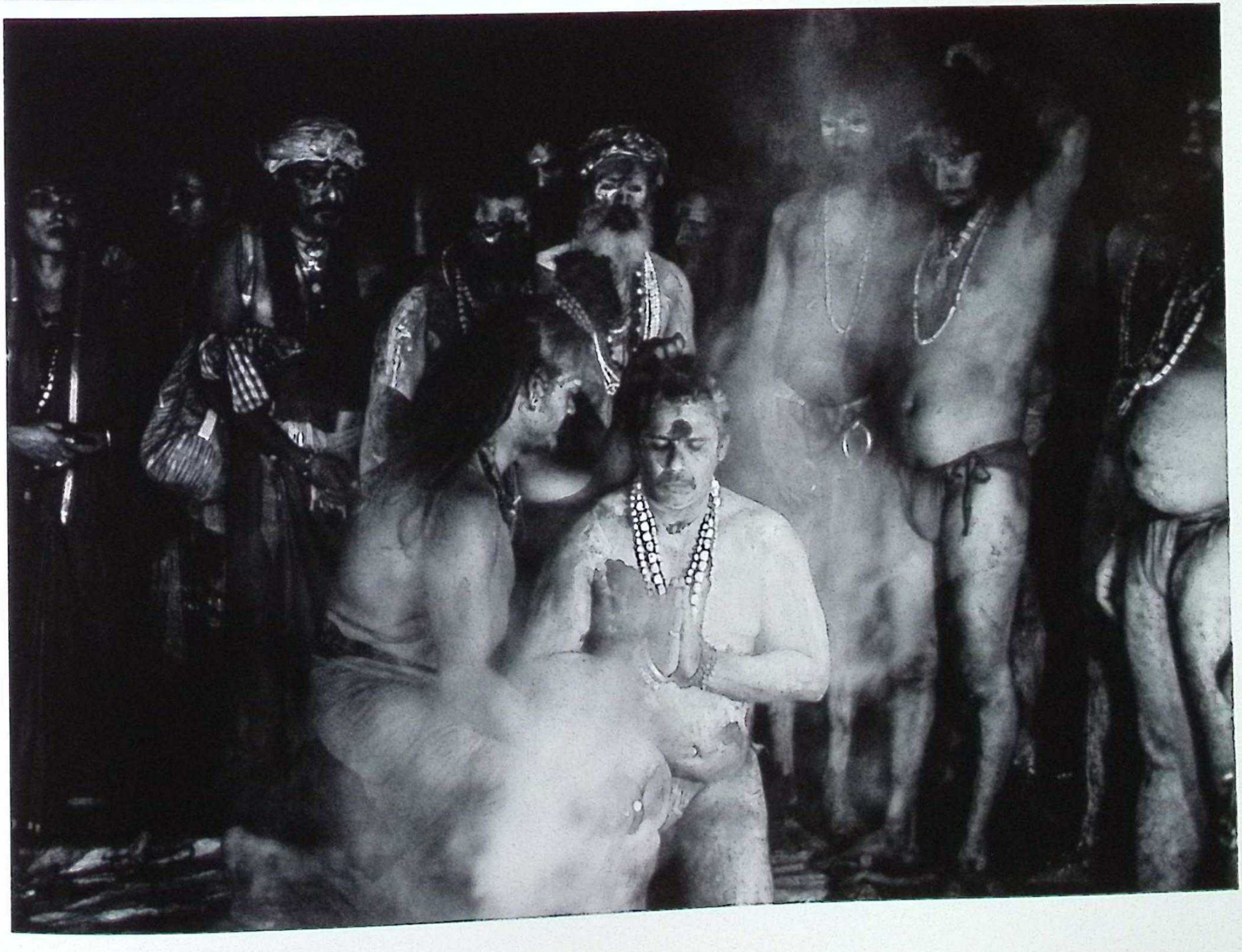






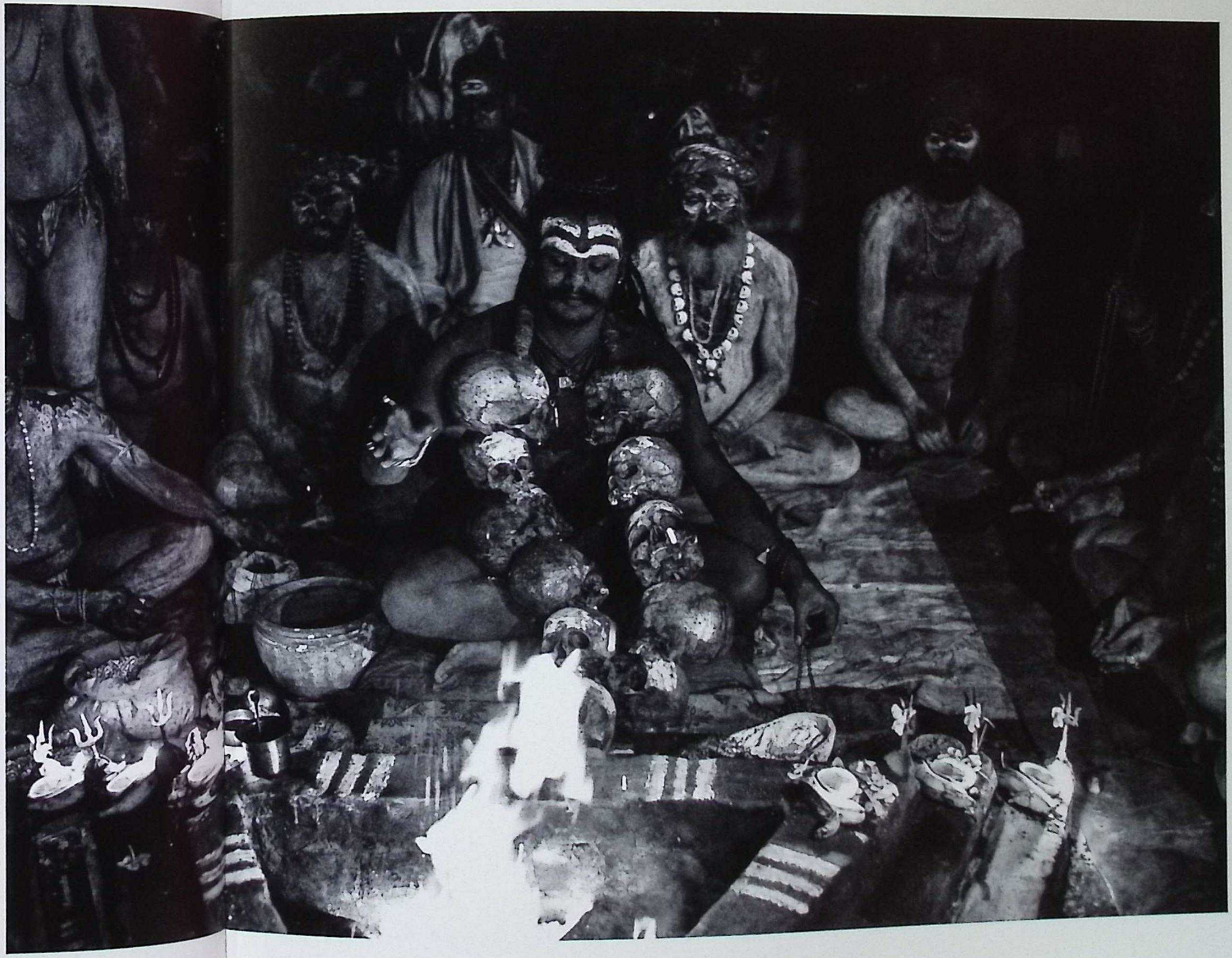






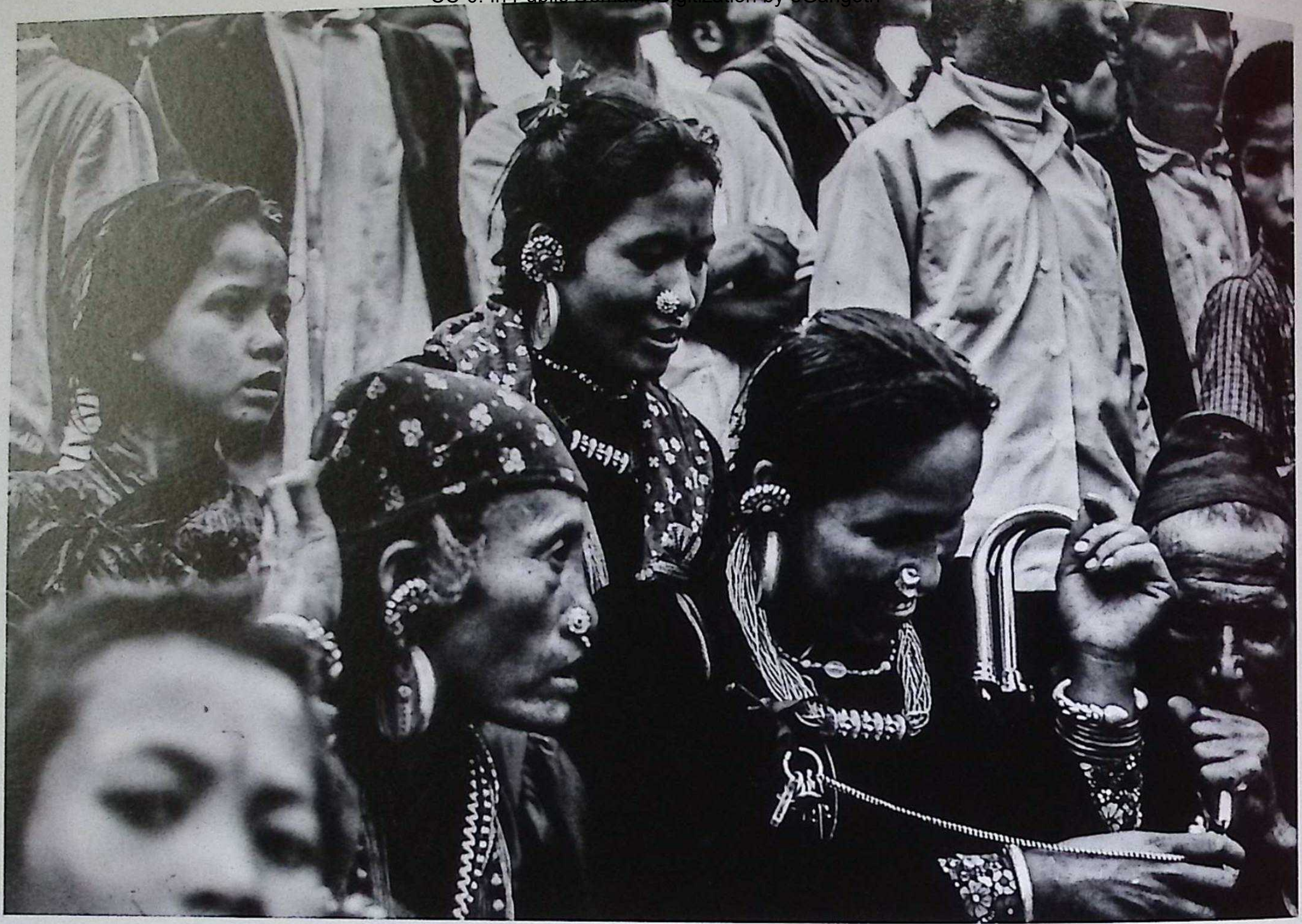
"O sword, thou with a sharp edge, inaccessible to others, thou has caused death – prosperity, pride and victory lie in thee, thou art the protector of dharma, I salute thee. The adept should worship the sword with the following mantra: "Oṁ aiṁ hṛīṁ phat" - and then holding the clean sword cut into pieces the excellent sacrificial animal. Thereafter the adept should carefully perfume the blood of the oblation with water, salt, good fruits, honey, perfumes and flowers. Then the adept should offer the blood by repeating: "Oṁ aiṁ hṛīṁ kauśki – I am giving you the blood". Thus saying the adept should put the blood at a proper place and a light-lamp should be put on the severed head of the animal."

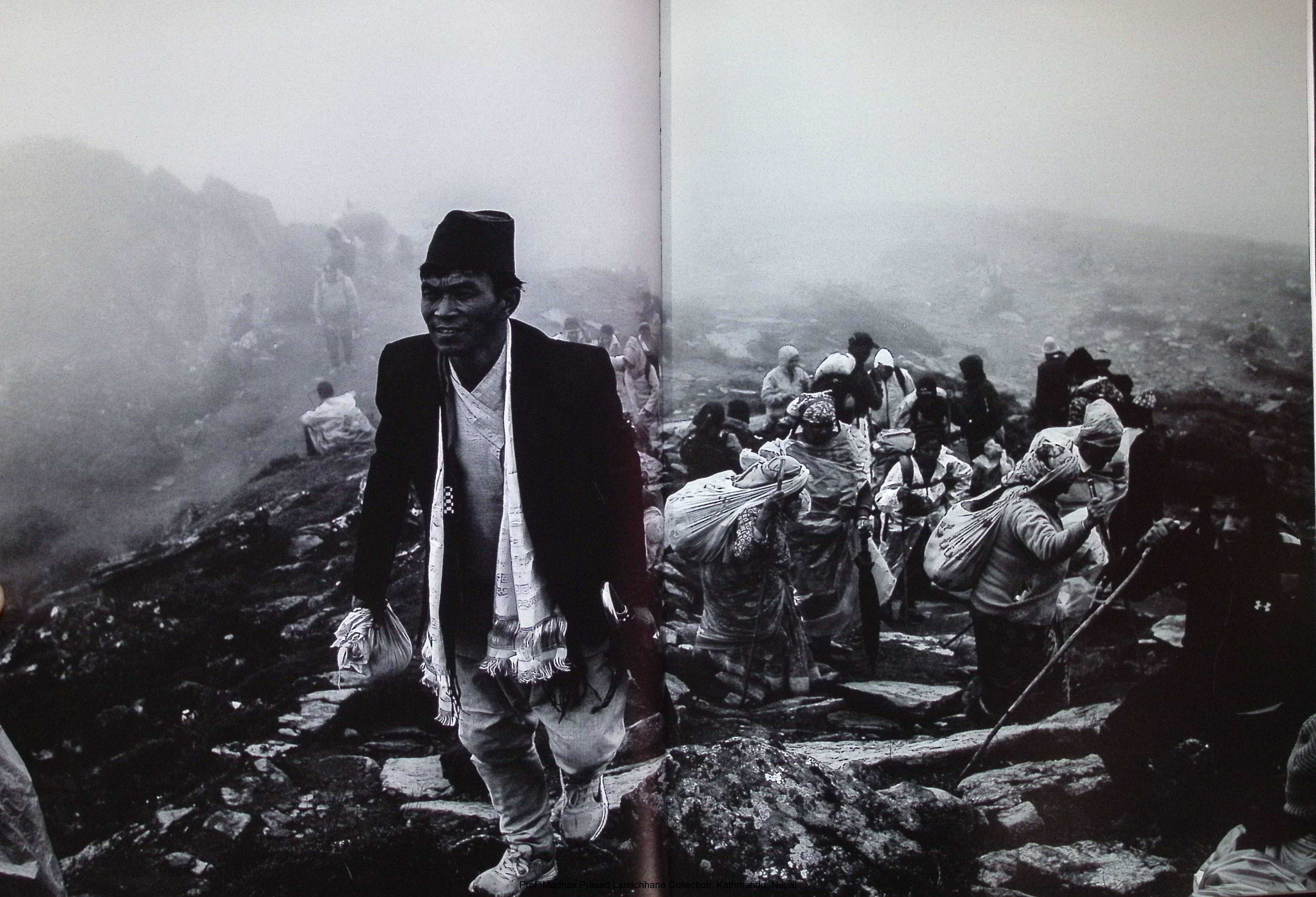
– Kālikā Purāṇa 55.16-20

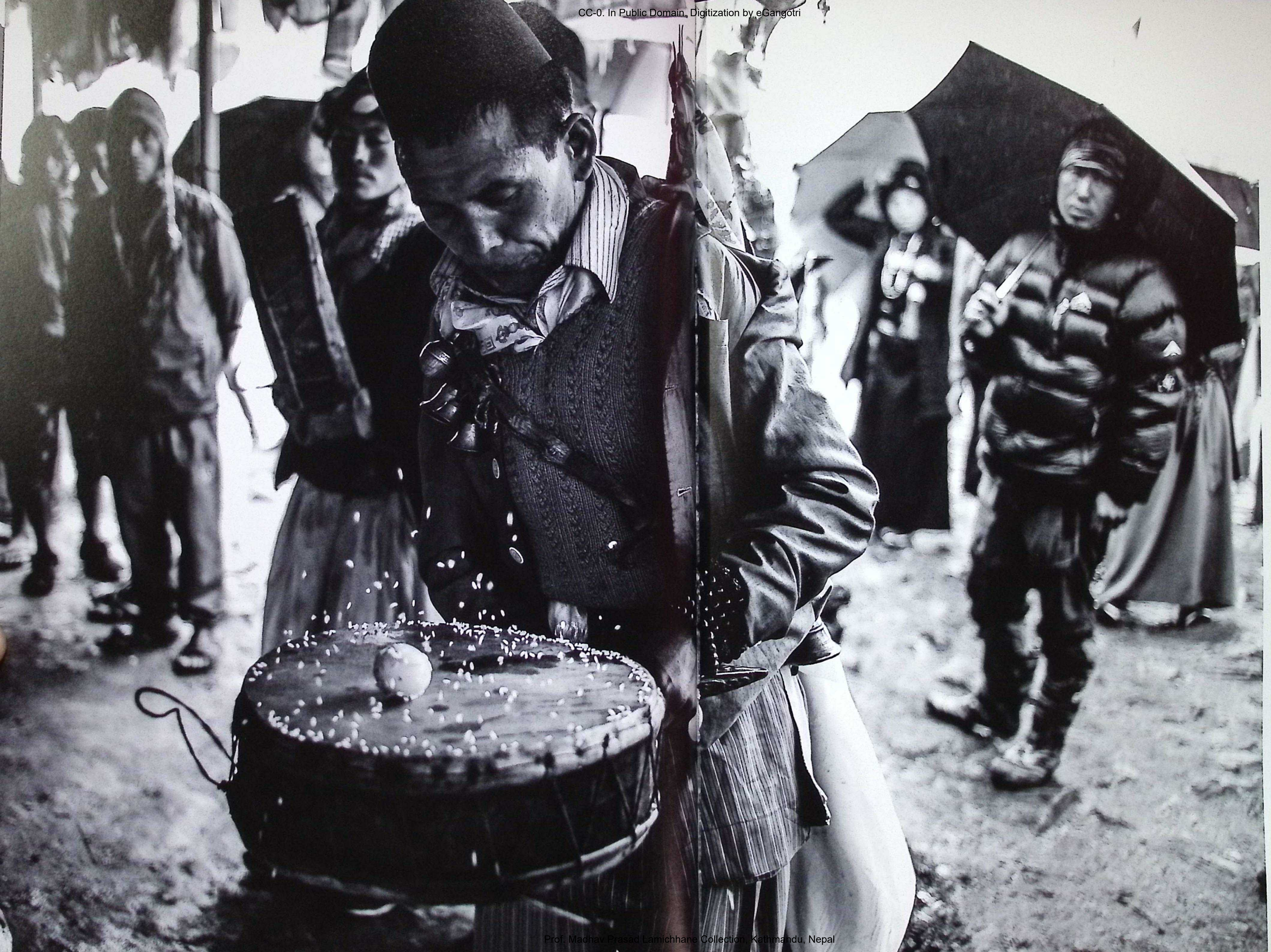


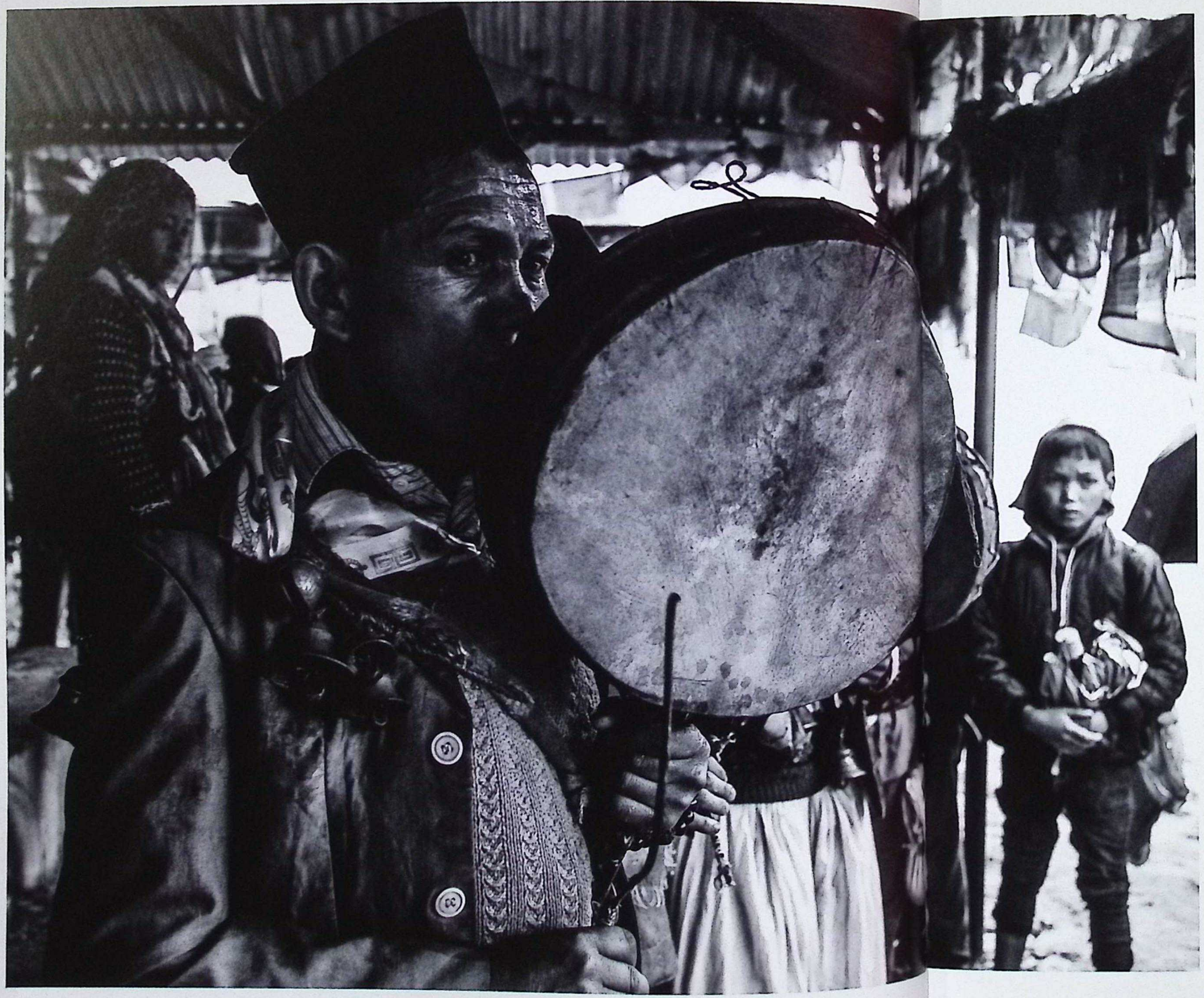
"O beloved! When [these spirits] hear [the mantras] emerging from the five transmissions, they all [become] agitated and run off in [all] directions."

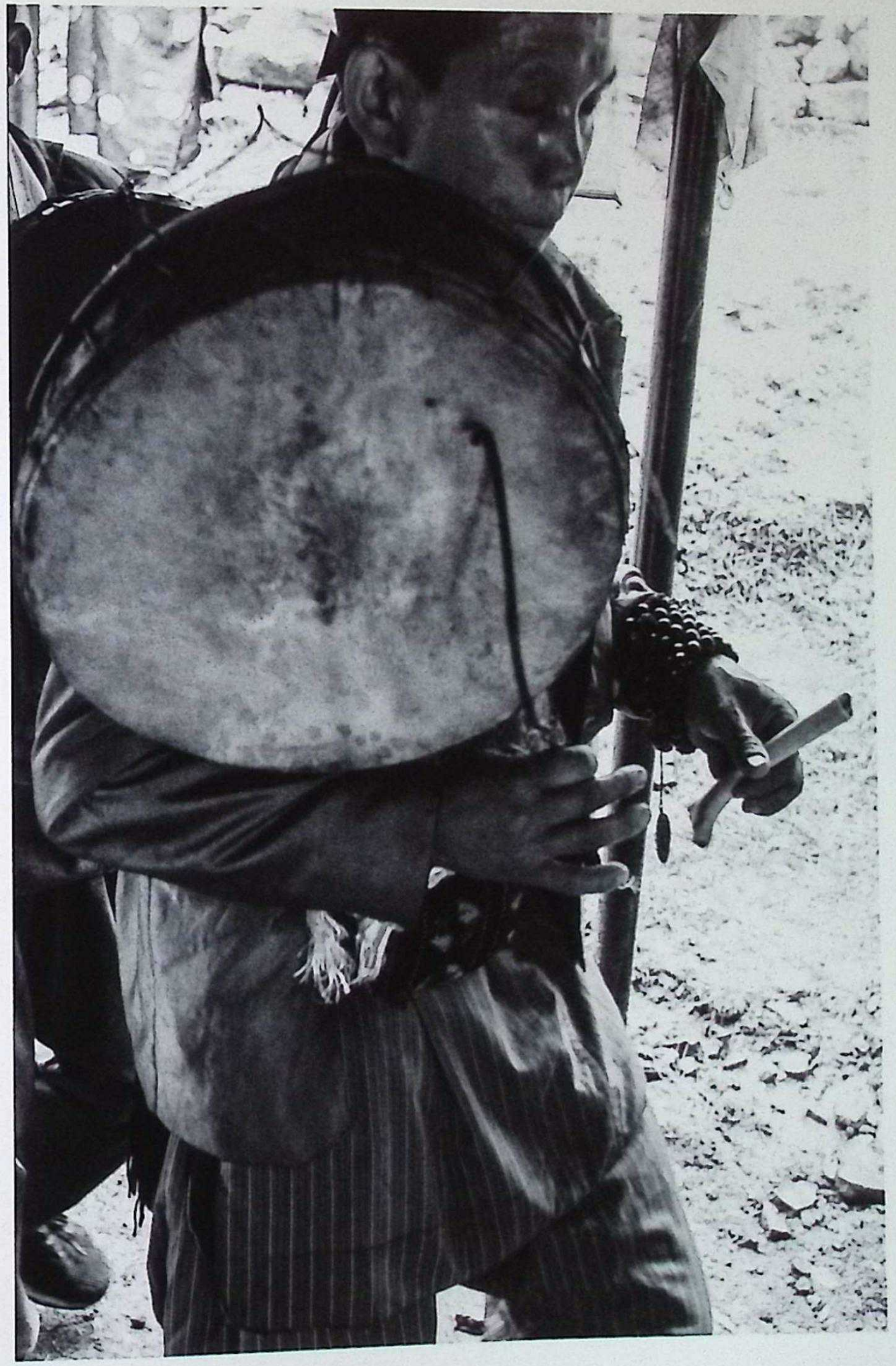
— *Netra Tantra 19.33*





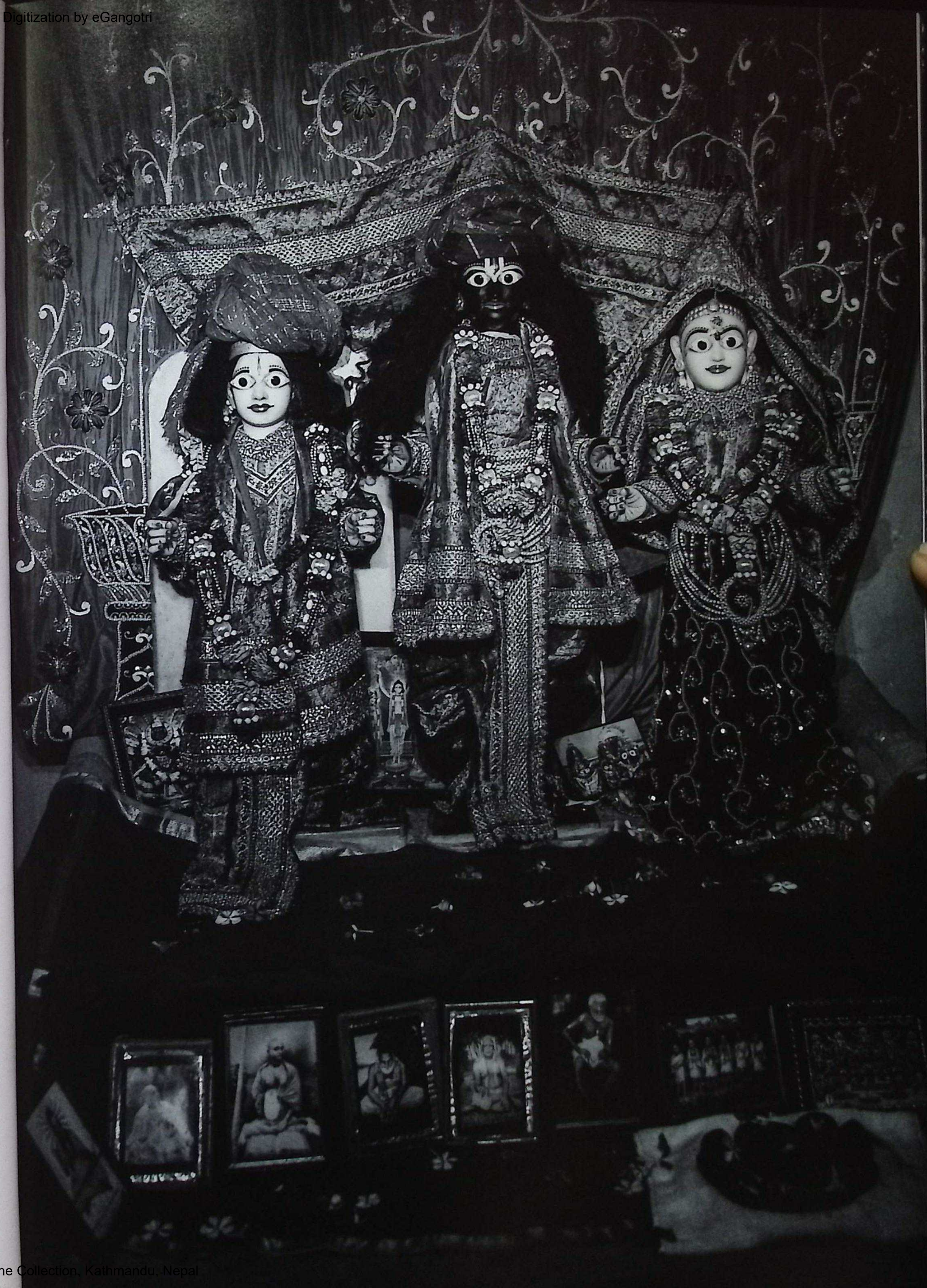


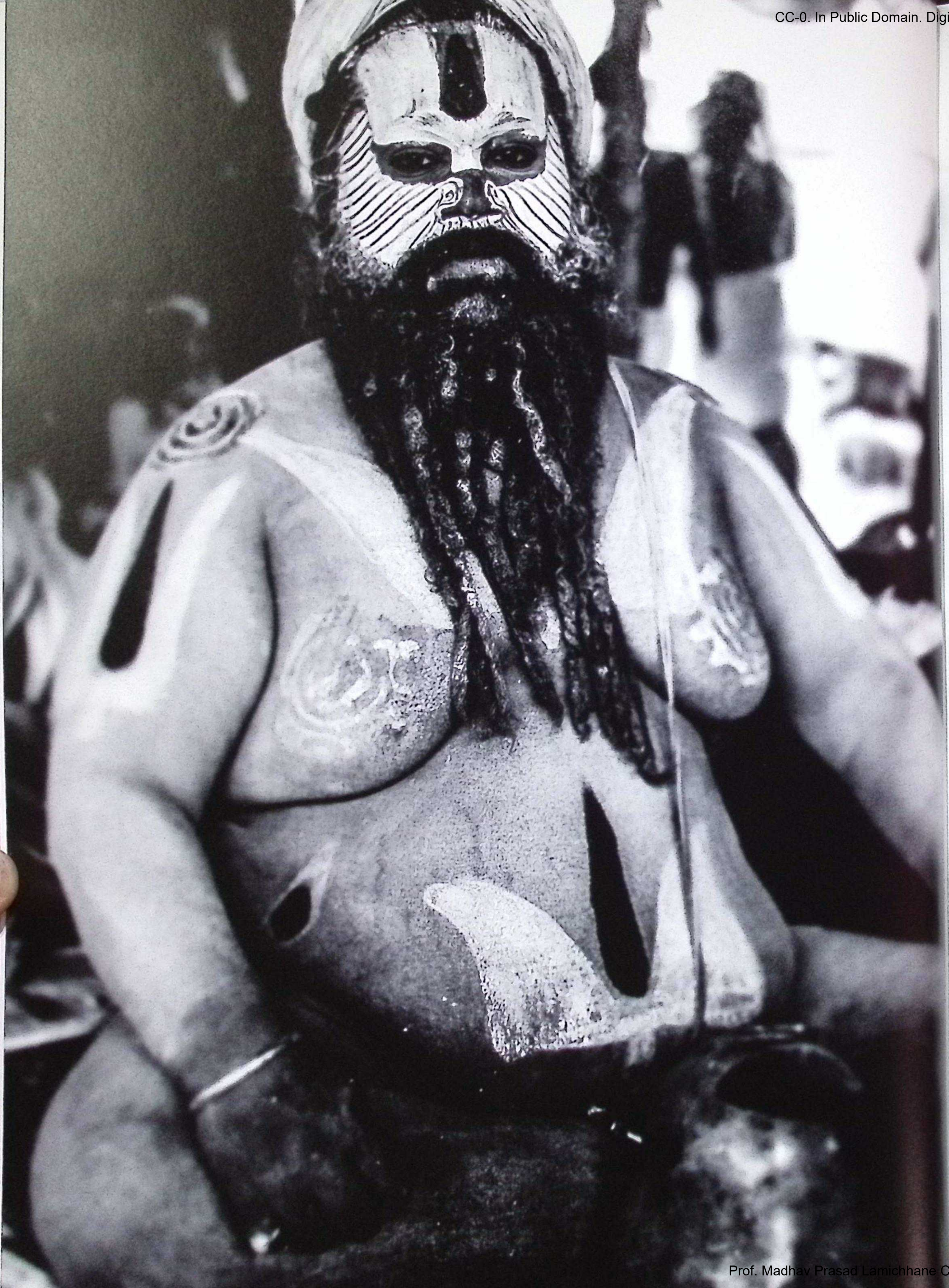


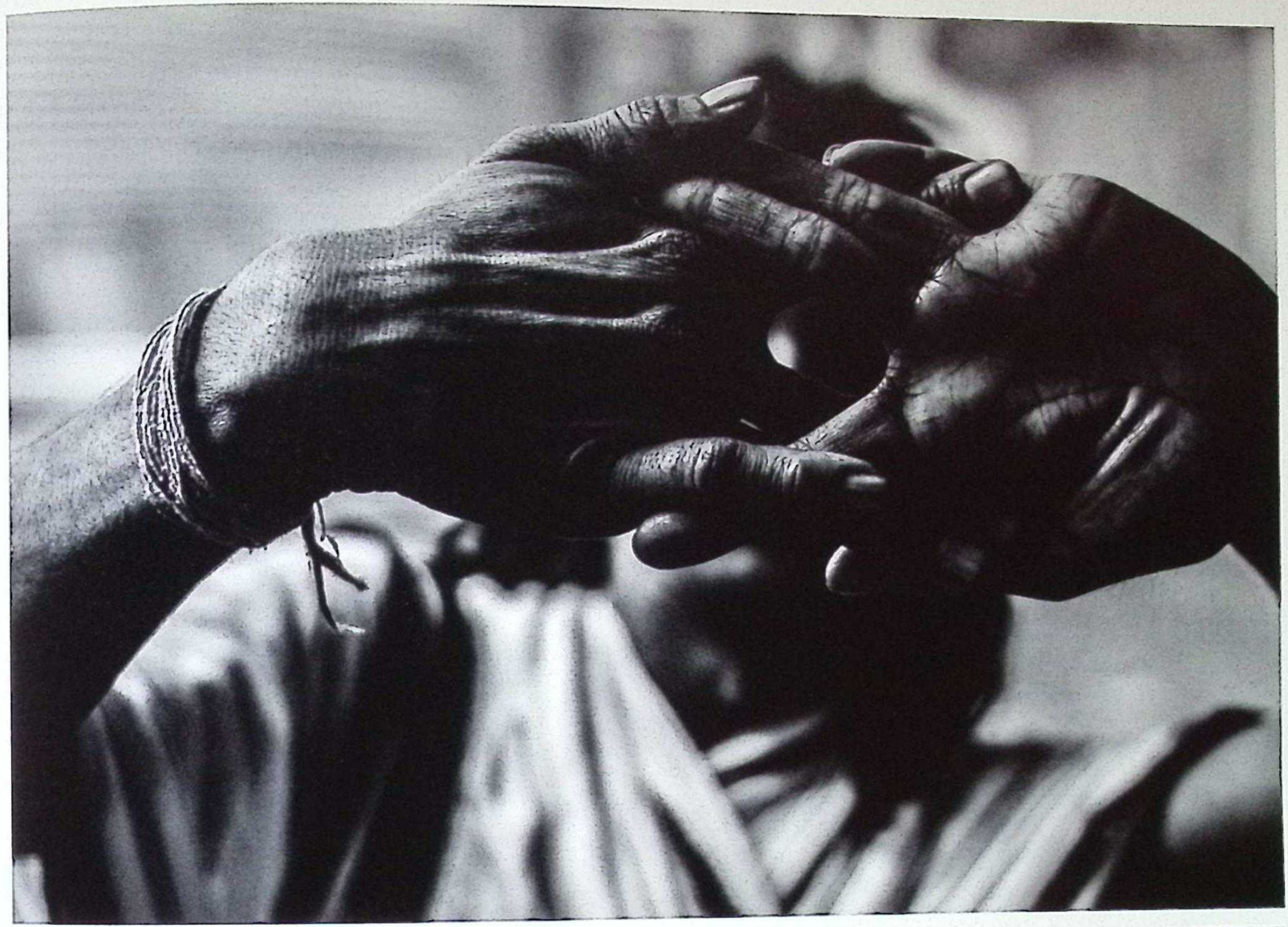


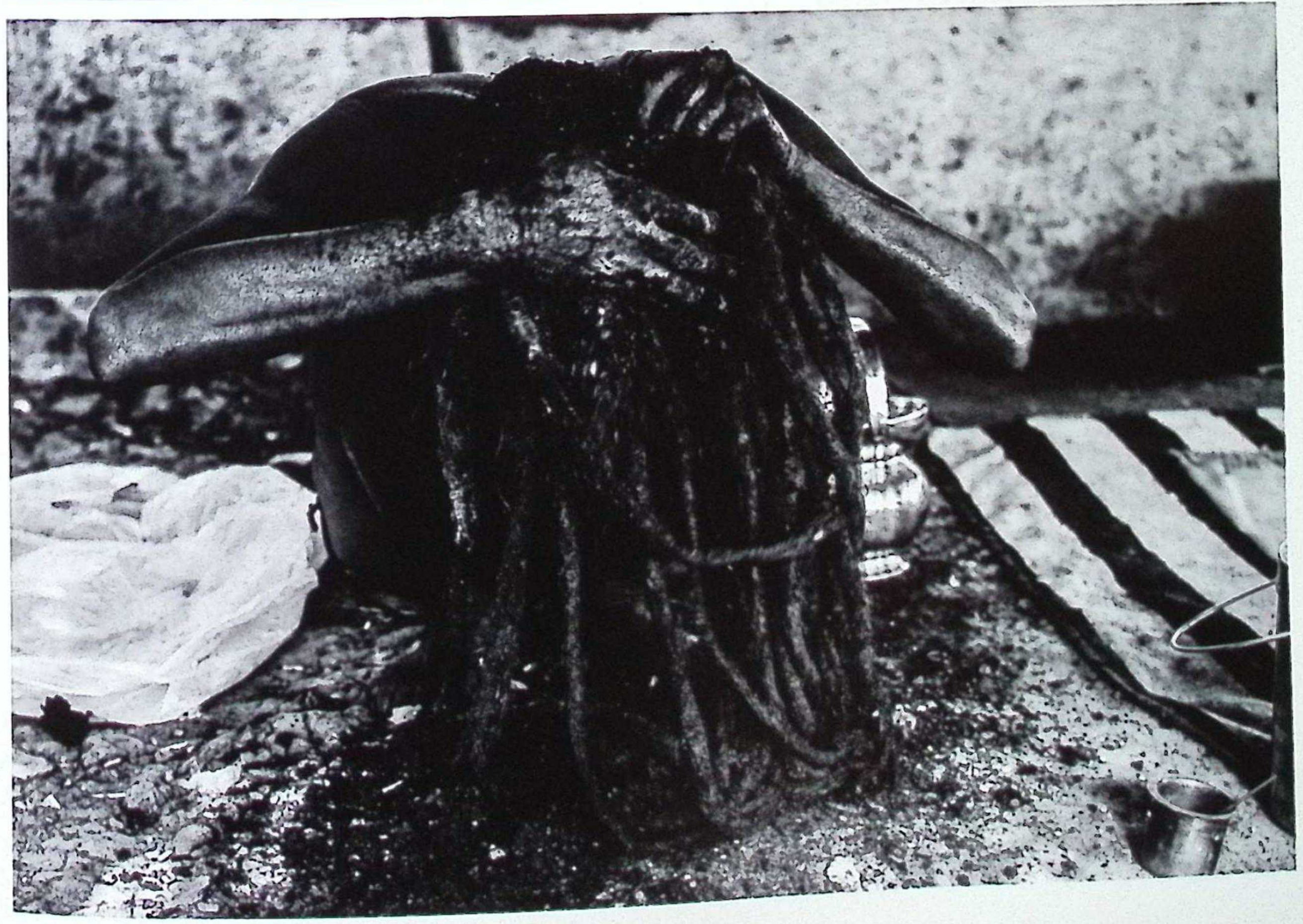
"Brahmā, best of knowers of the Vedas, spoke: 'Hear the truth from me, Rāma... Sītā is Lakṣmī, you are the god Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa and Prajāpati. In order to kill Rāvaṇa you entered a human body in this world. You have now achieved that purpose of yours, best of upholders of righteousness, Rāvaṇa has been killed; joyfully return to heaven, Rāma'"

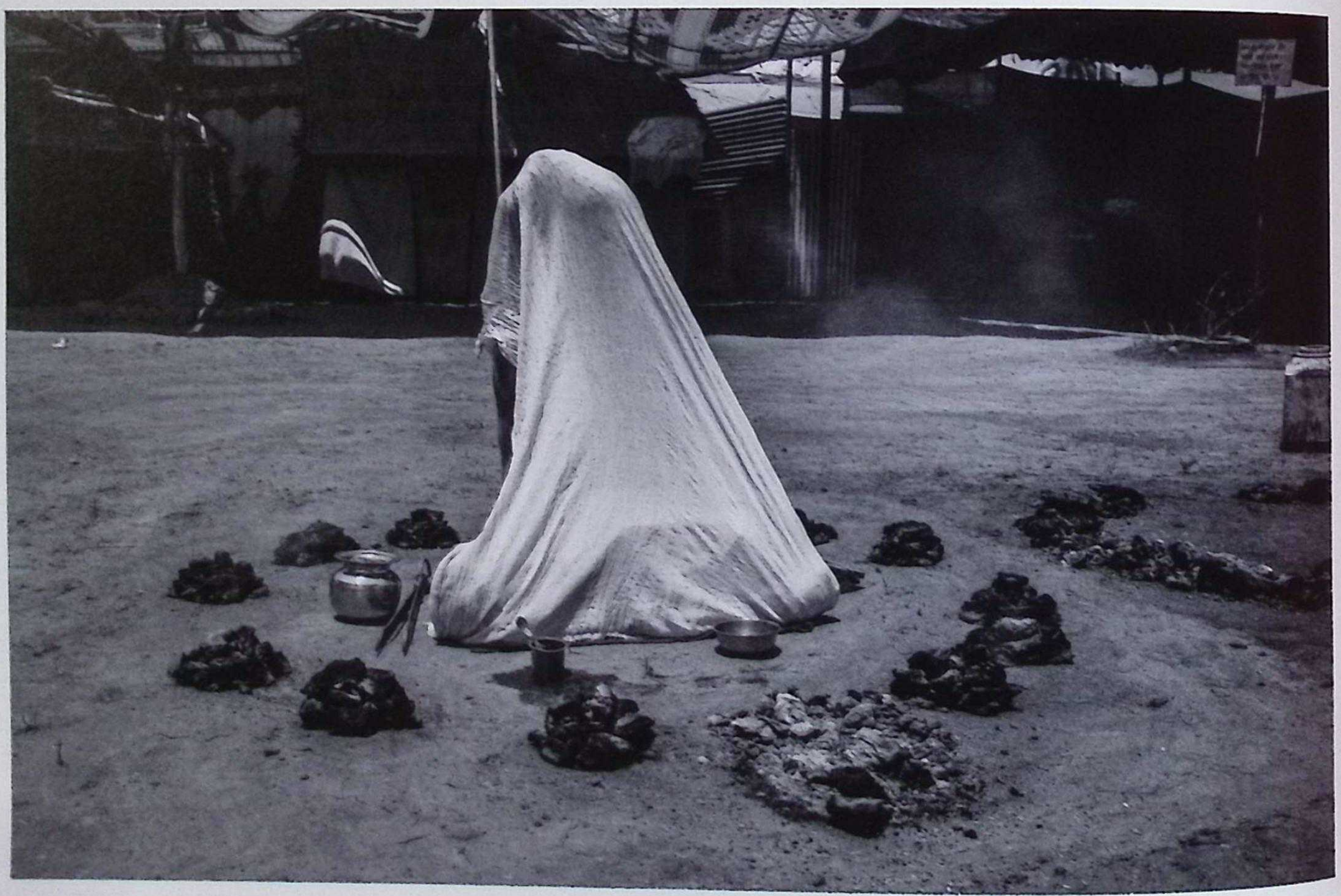
– Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa 6.105.14b-d + 25-26

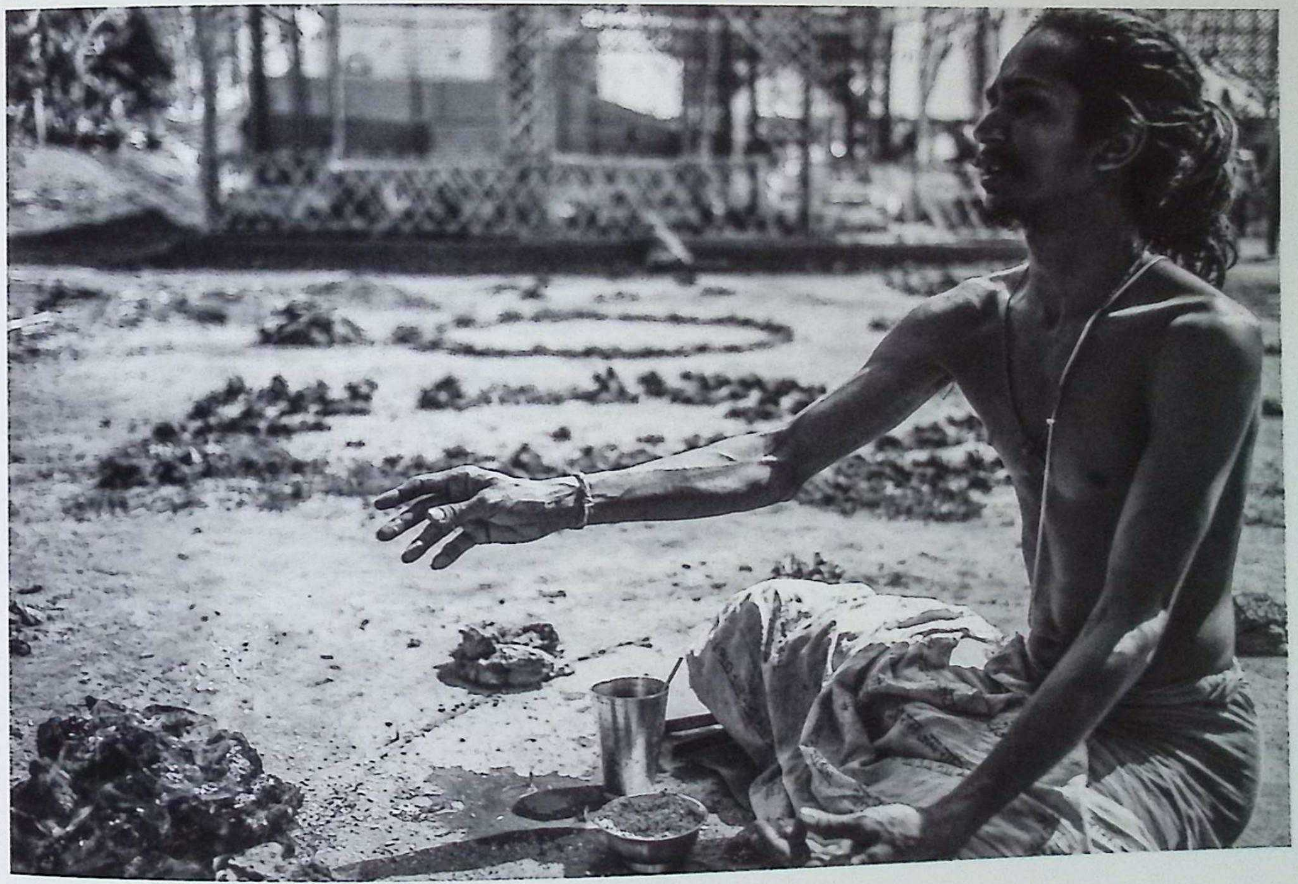


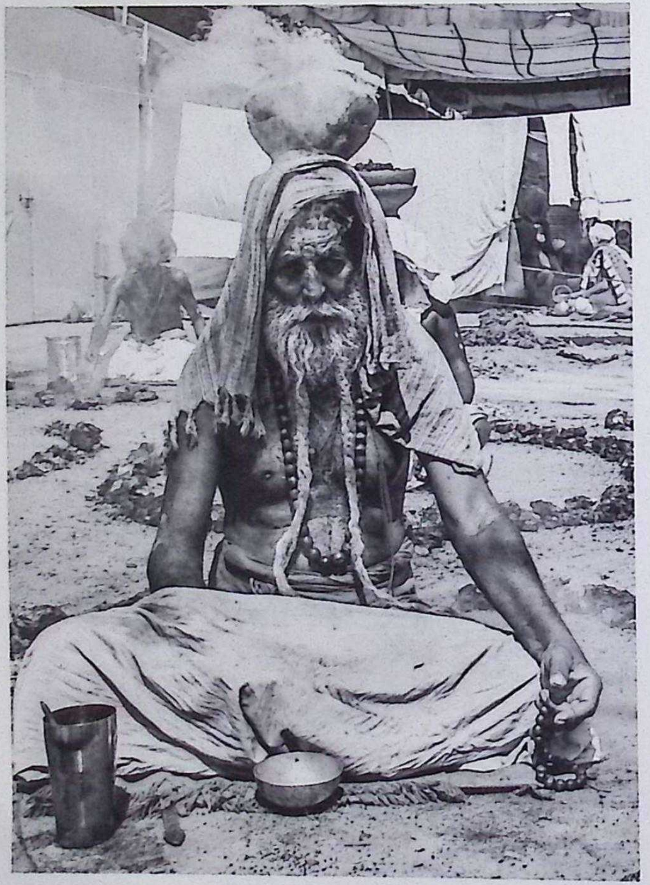


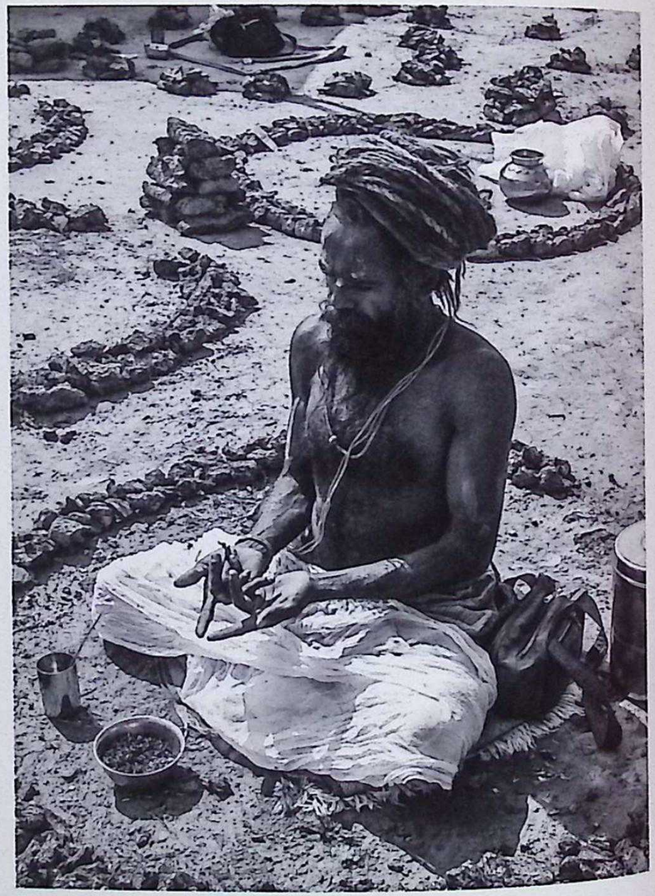




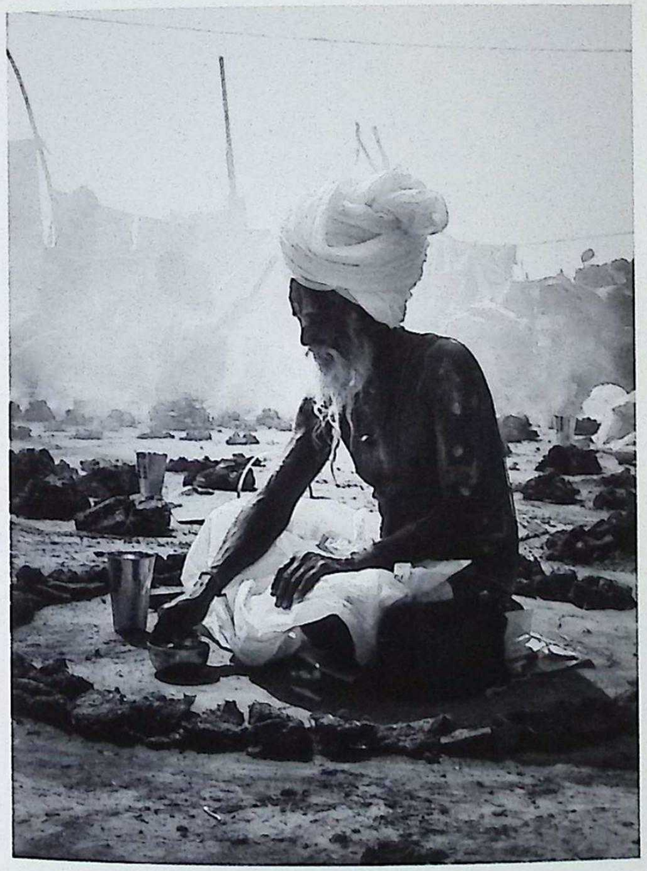


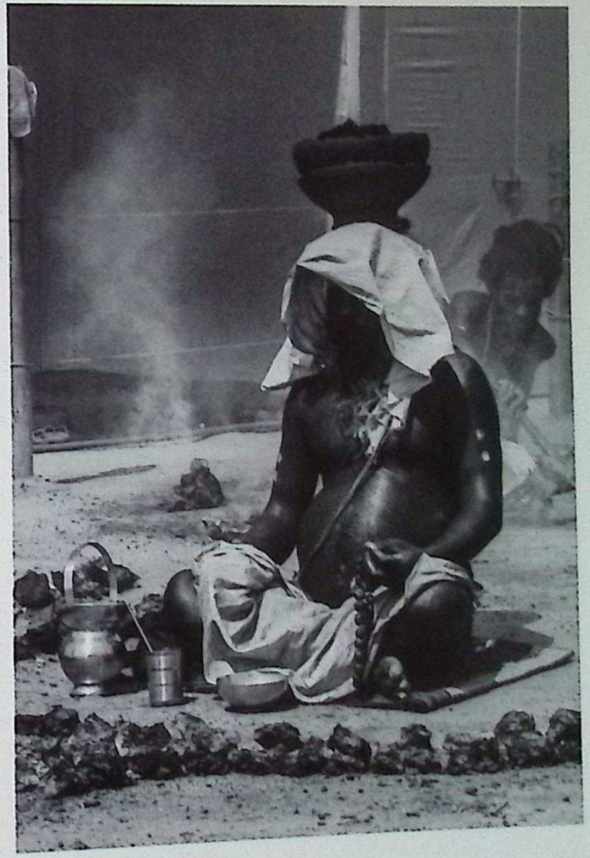


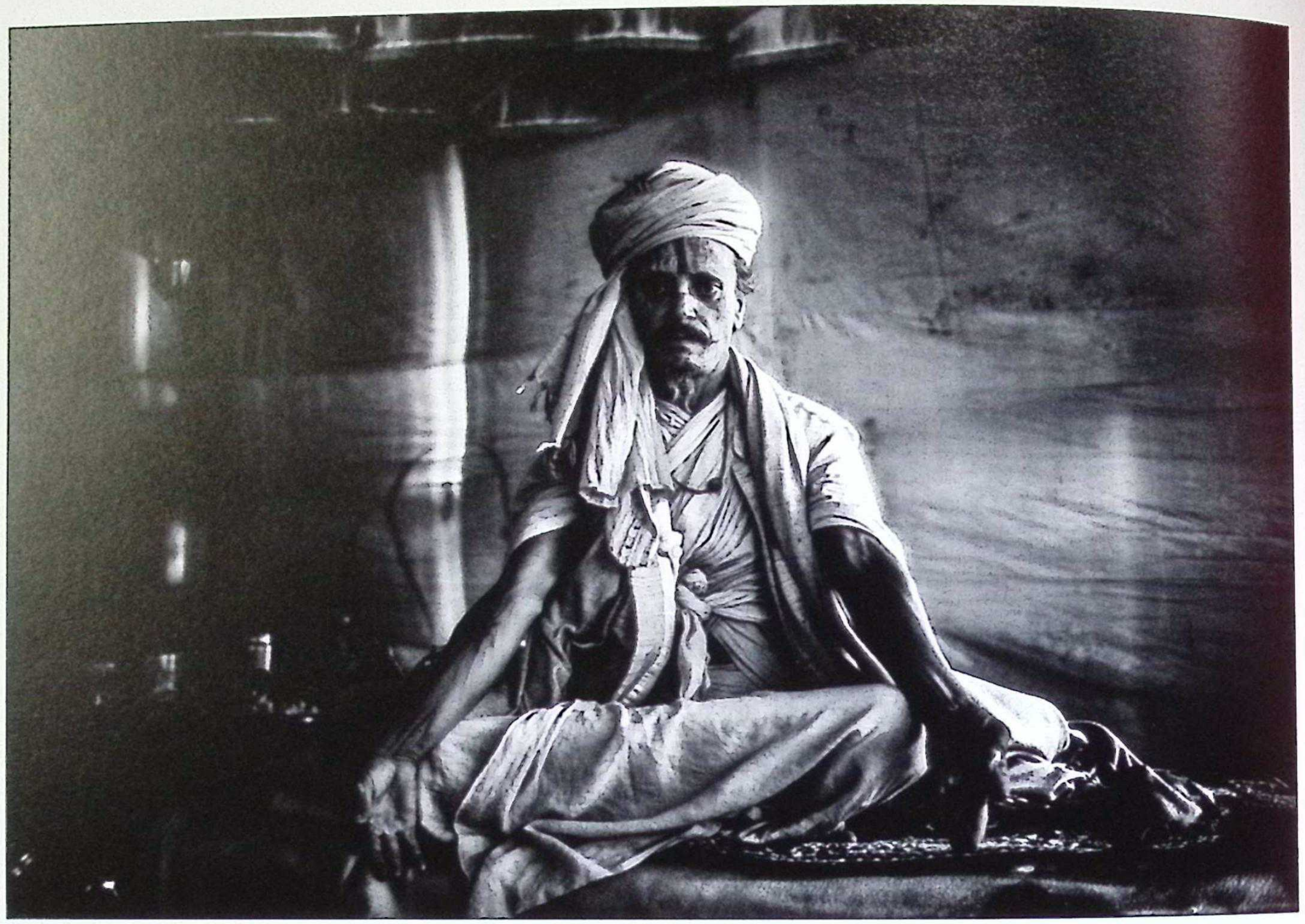


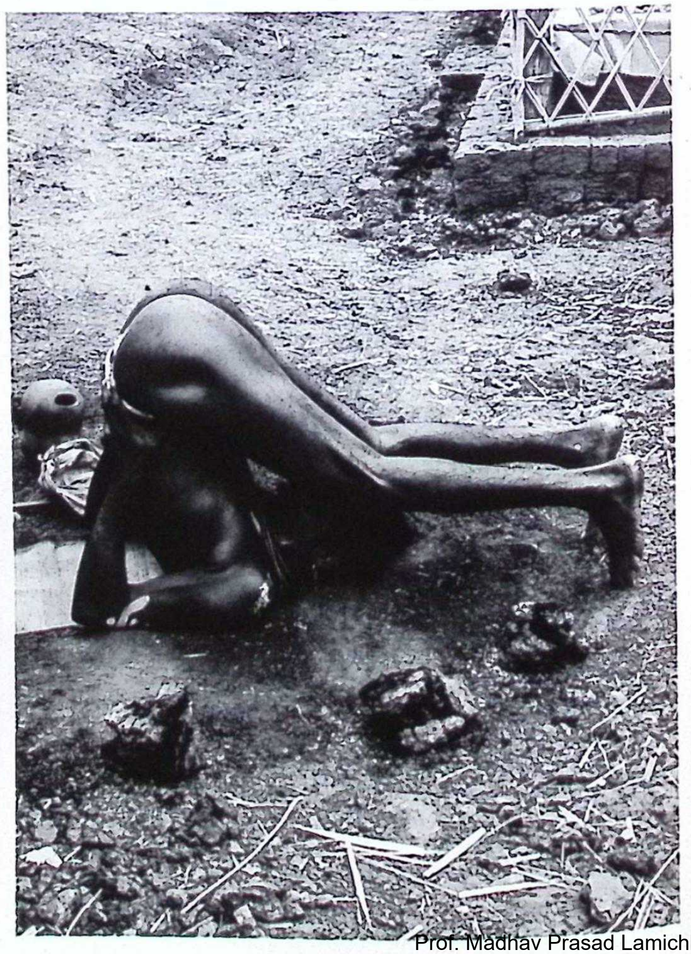


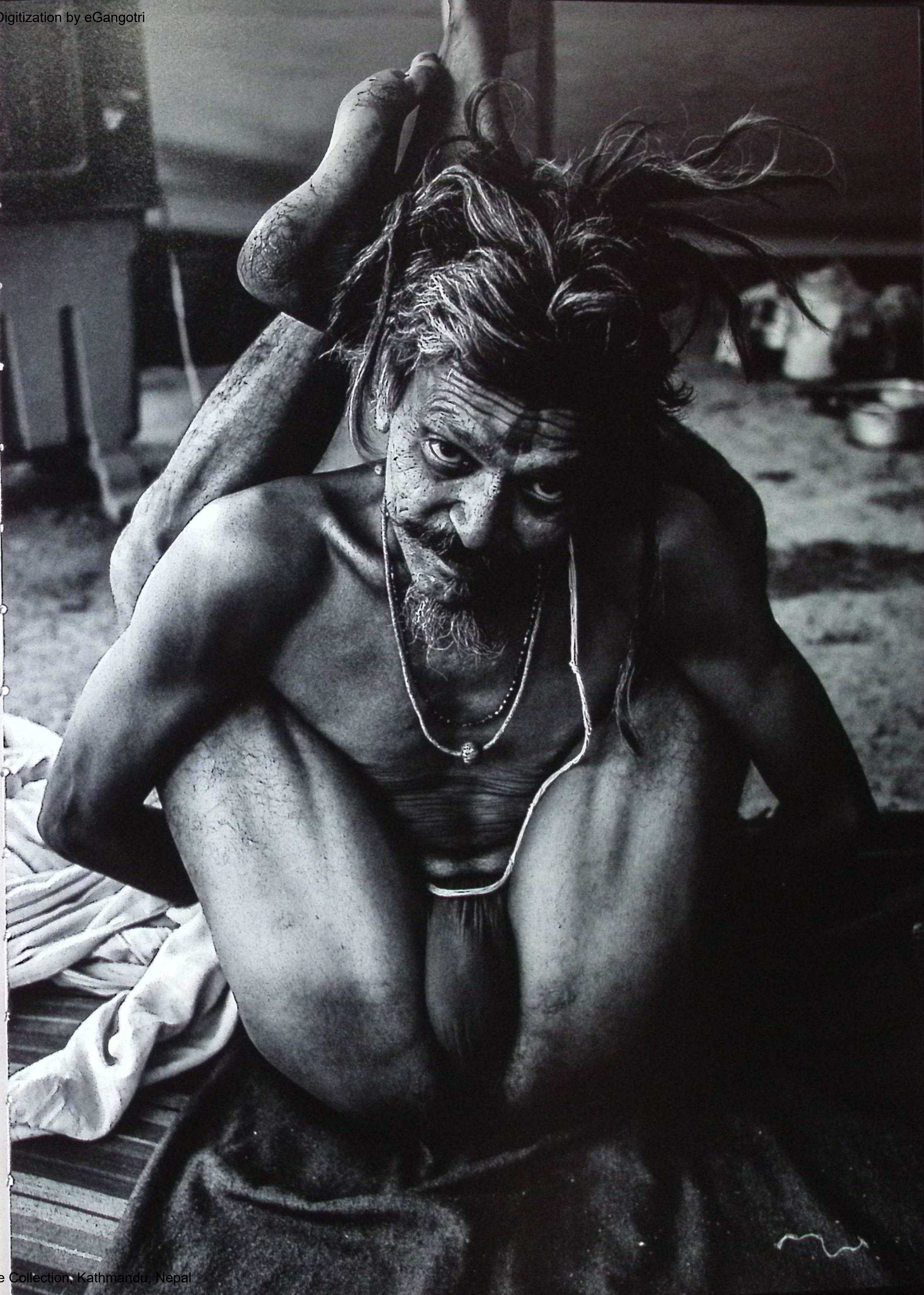
> "One should execute penance during the hottest summer days by subjecting oneself to burning fires on four sides and the blazing sun overhead; during the rainy season one should remain outside, subjecting oneself to torrents of rain; and in the freezing winter one should remain submerged in water up to one's neck"
>
> — *Bhagāvata Purāṇa 11.18.4*

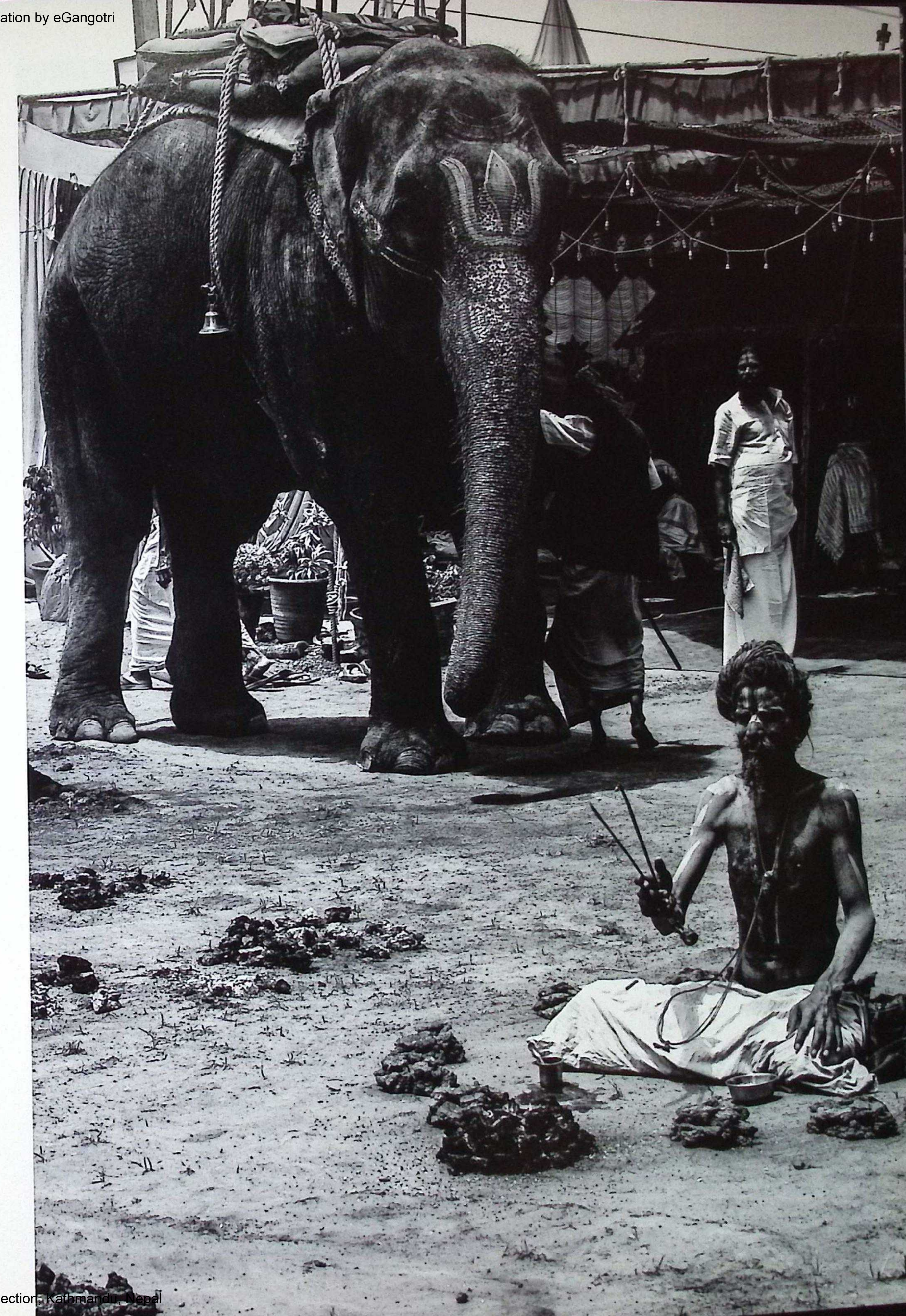


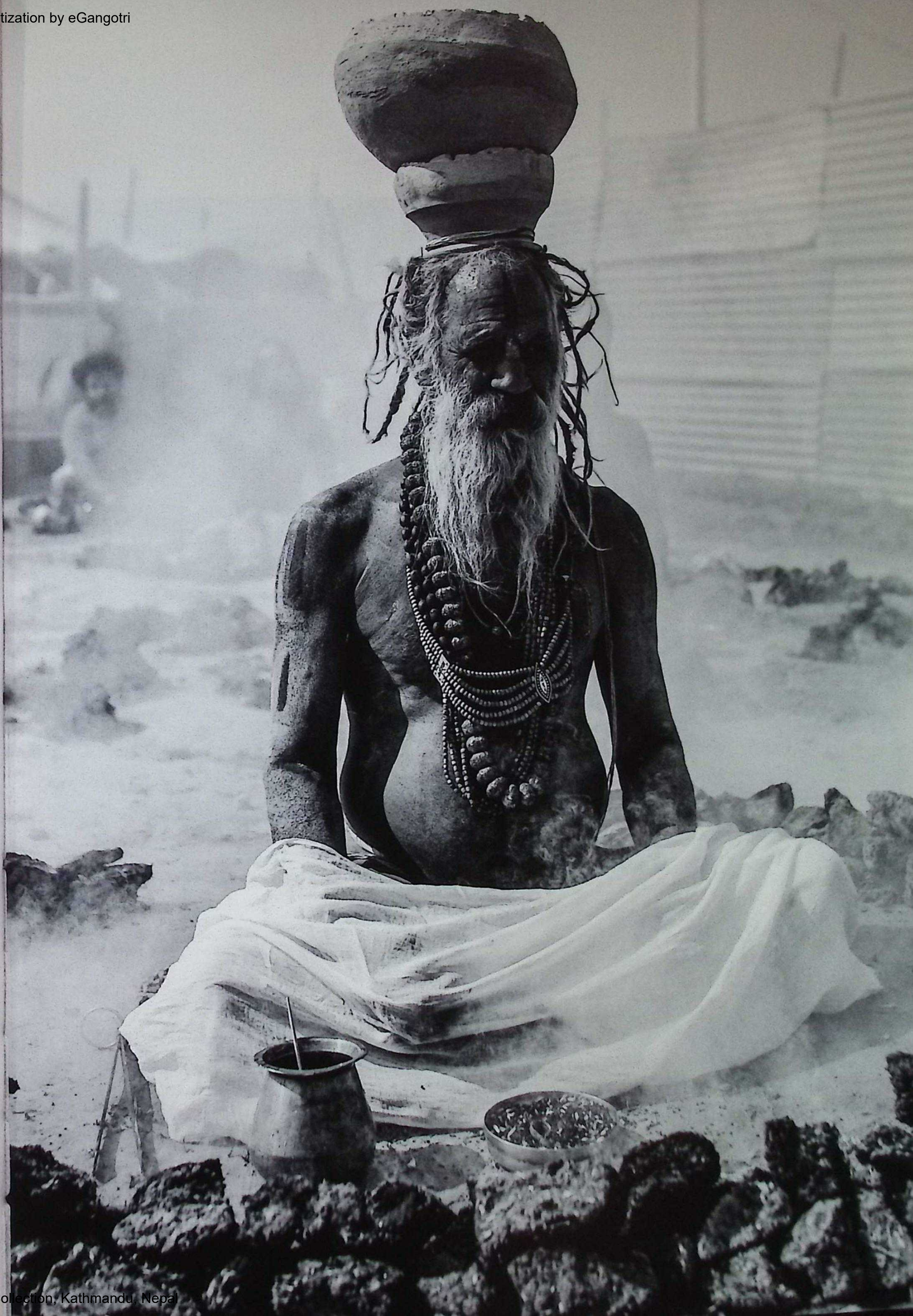






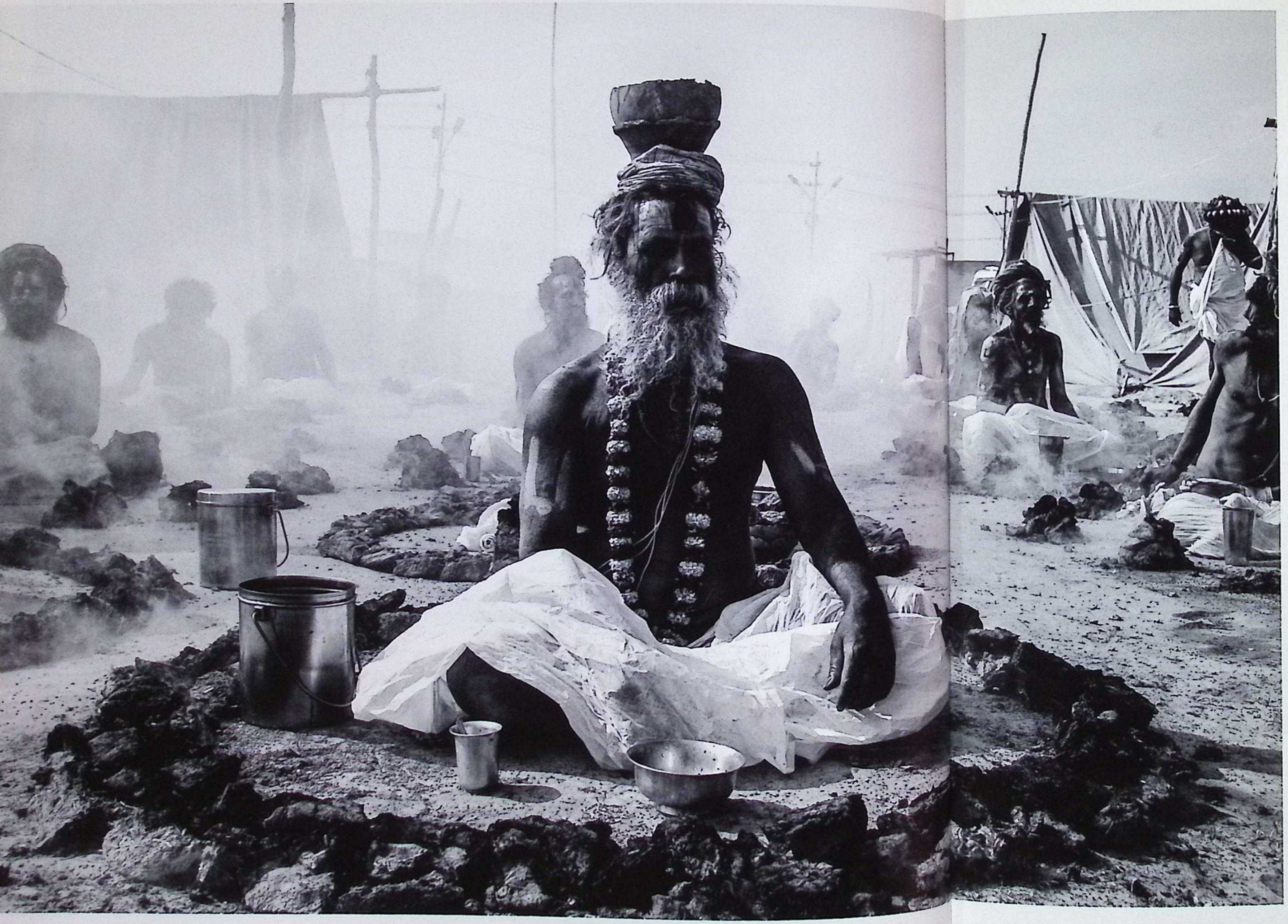


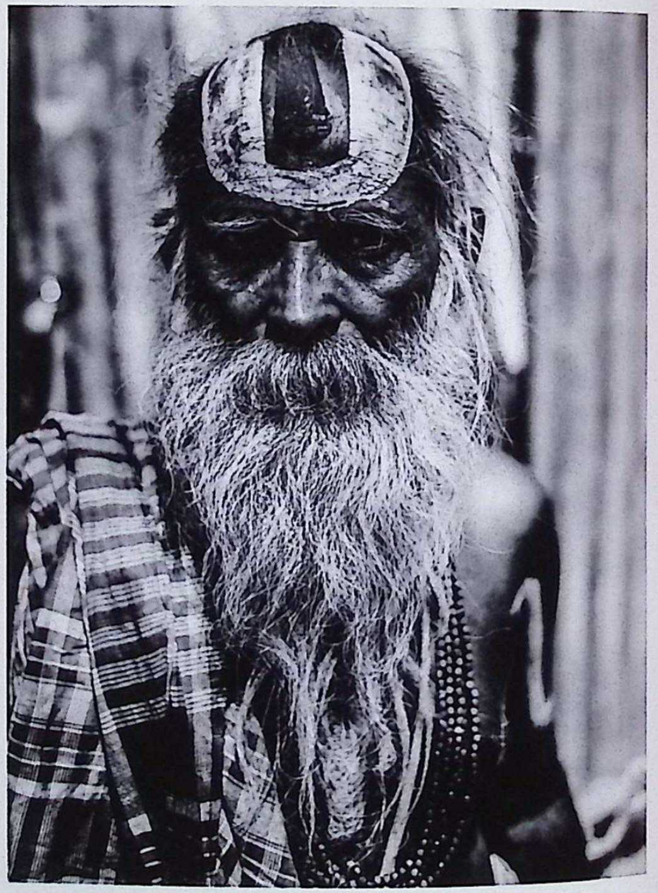


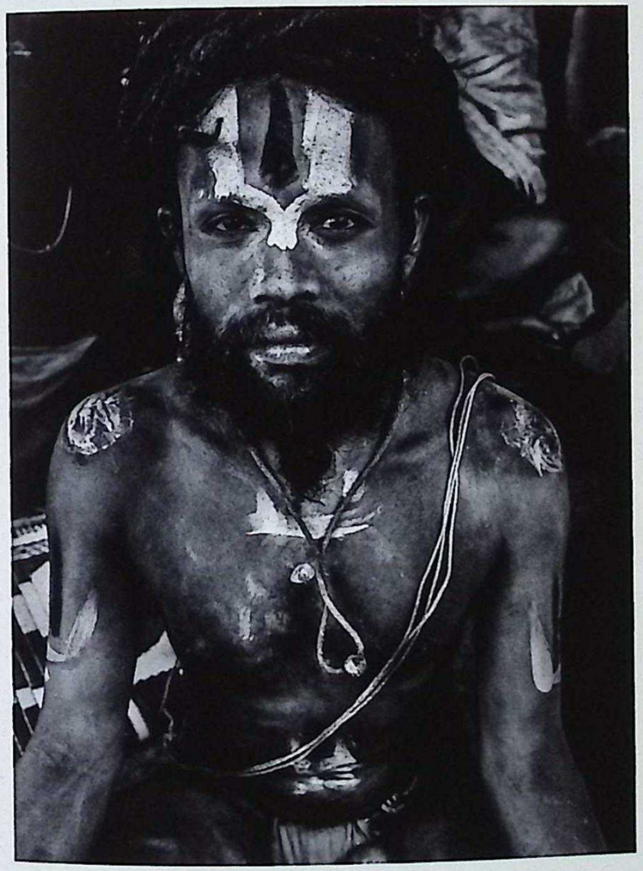


"The body is always decaying, like an unbaked [clay] pot in the water. One should bake it with the fire of yoga and make it pure."

— *Gheraṇḍasaṁhitā 1.8*

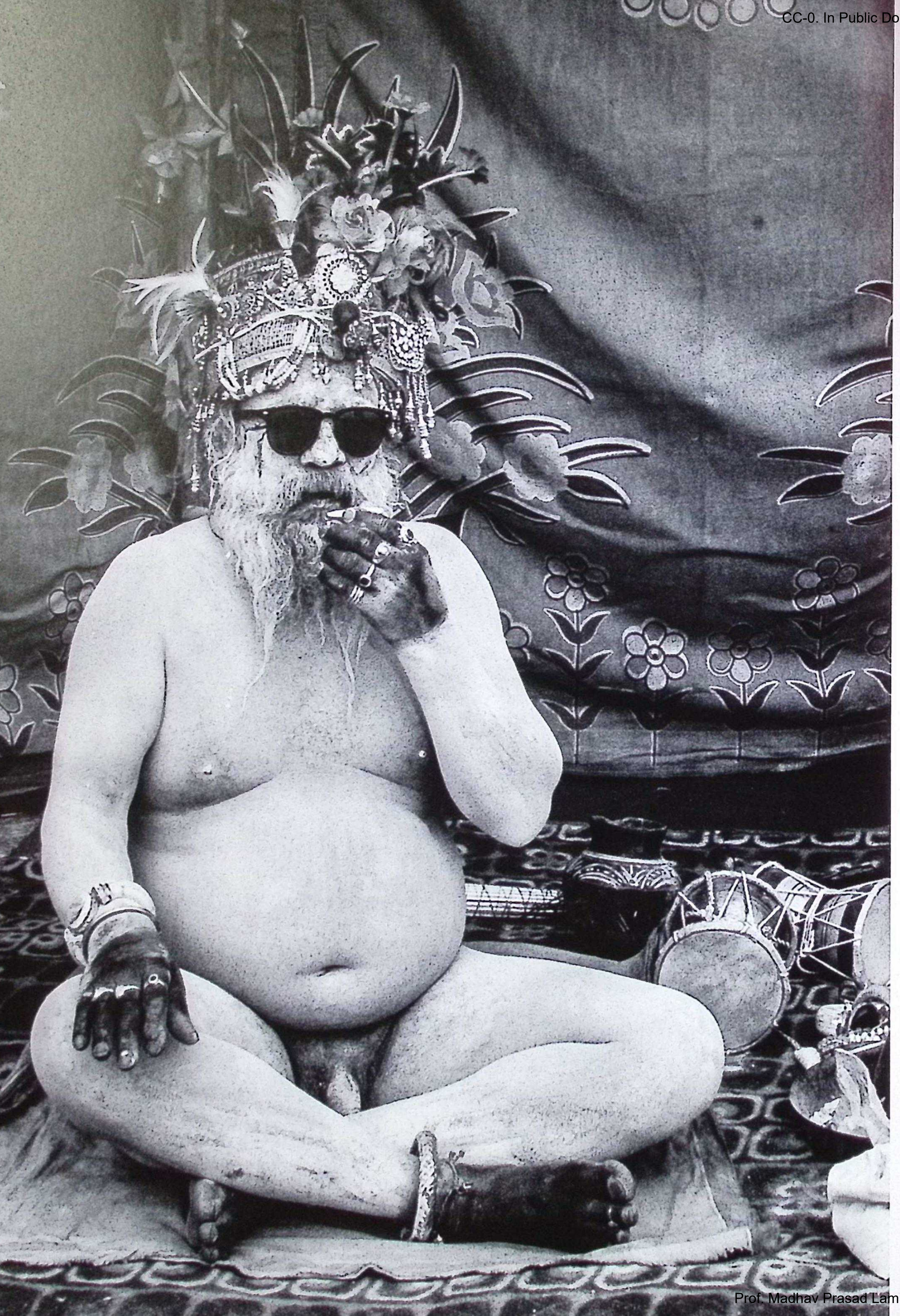


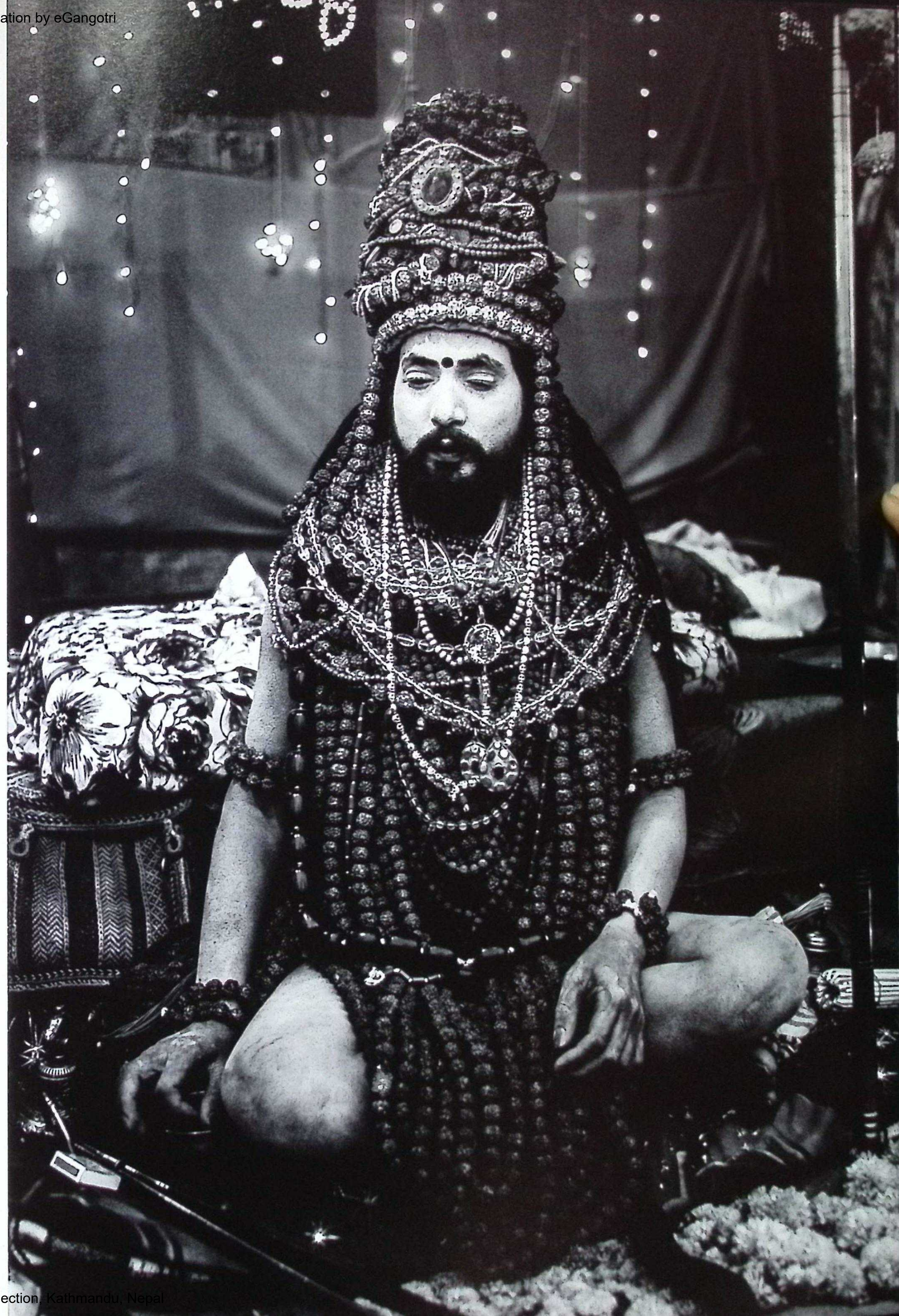


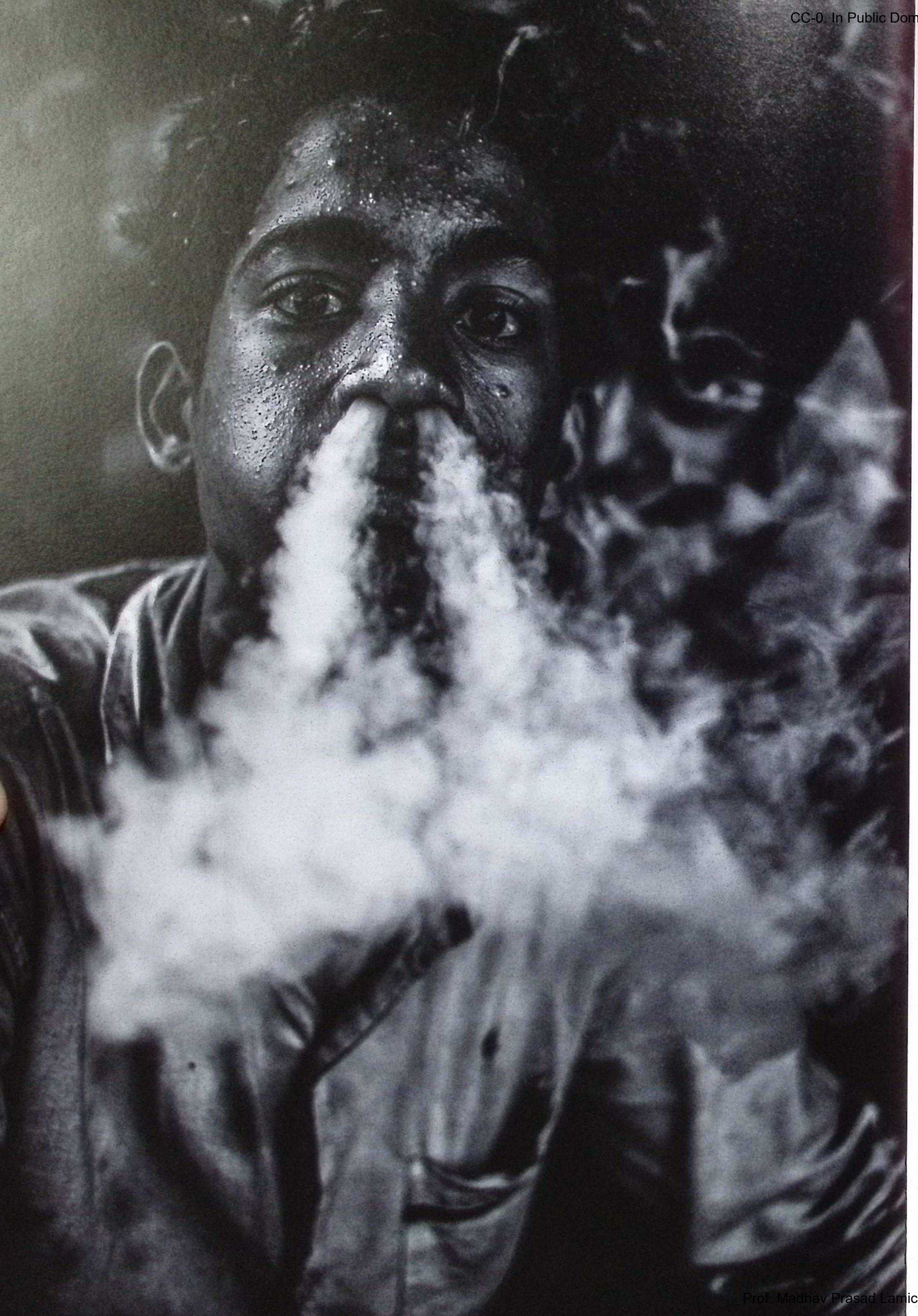


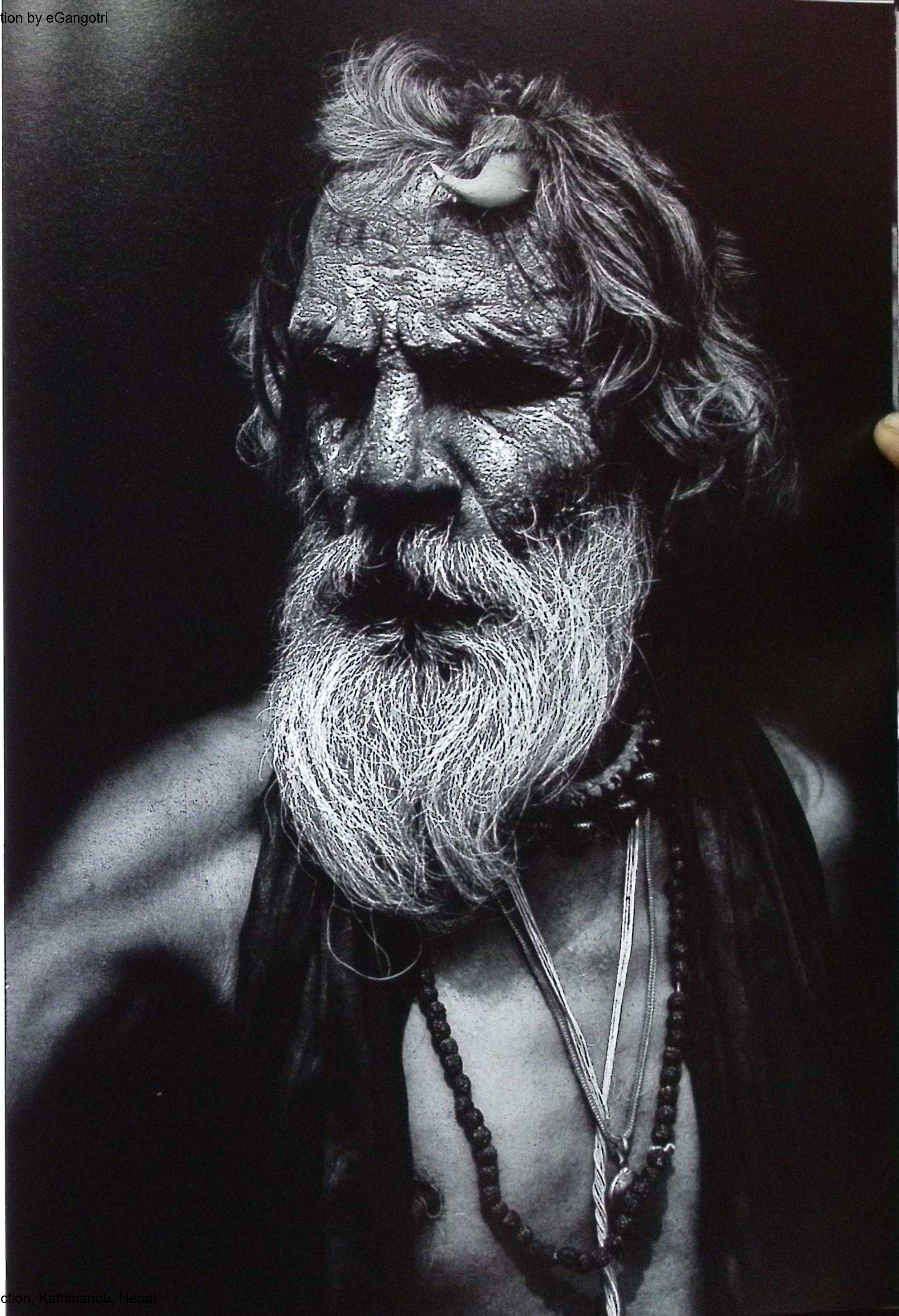
"O gazzelle-eyed one, by the employment of magic, supreme delight arises (in the heart of the spectator) instantaneously. (In this condition of the mind), Reality manifests itself."

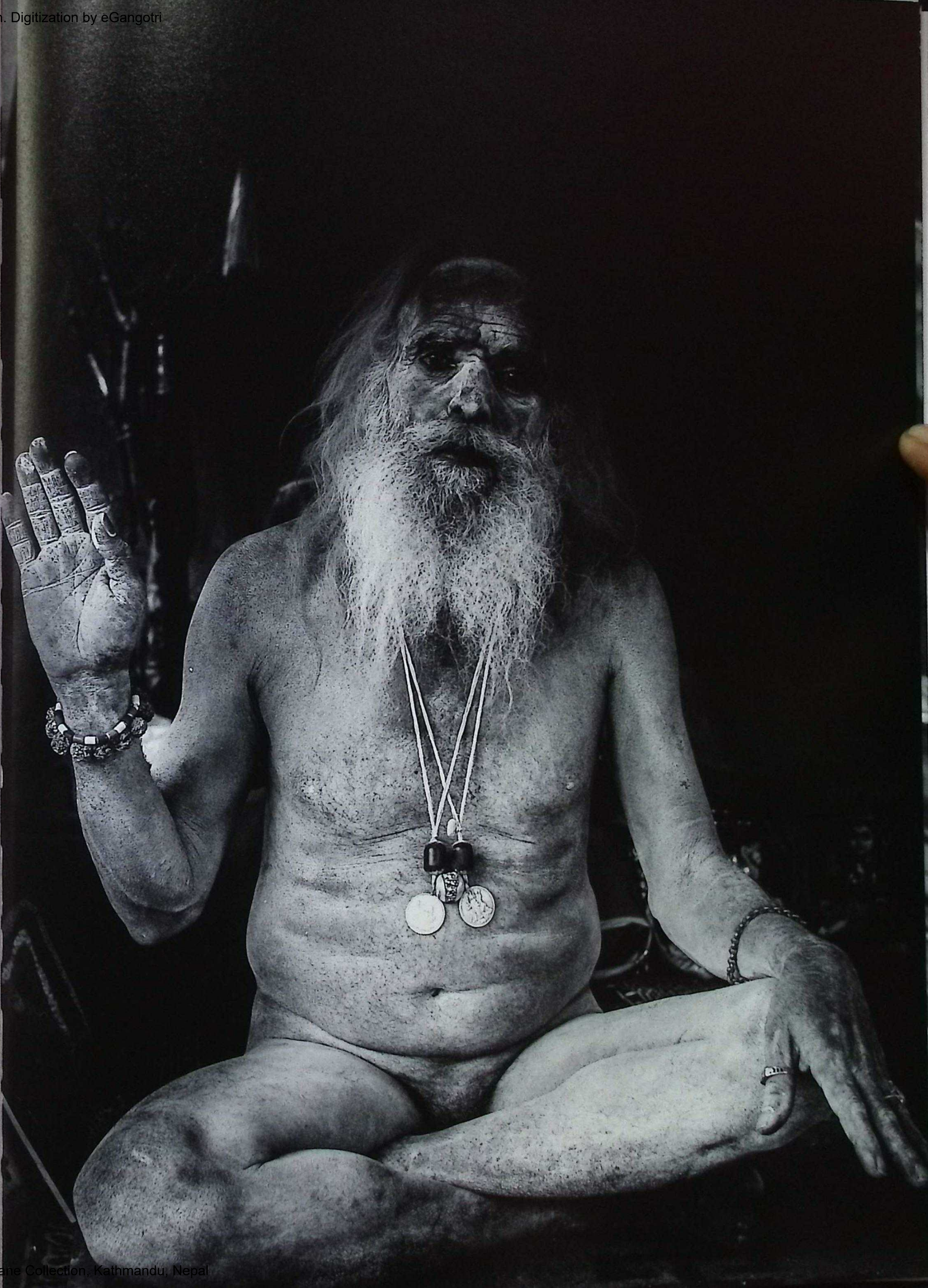
— *Vijñānabhairava Tantra 42.66*

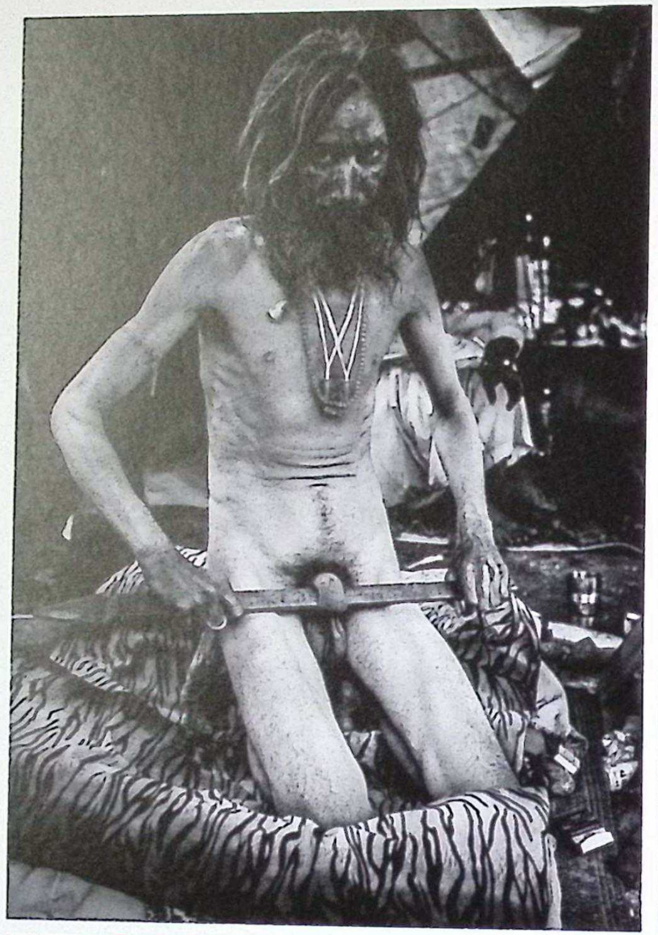


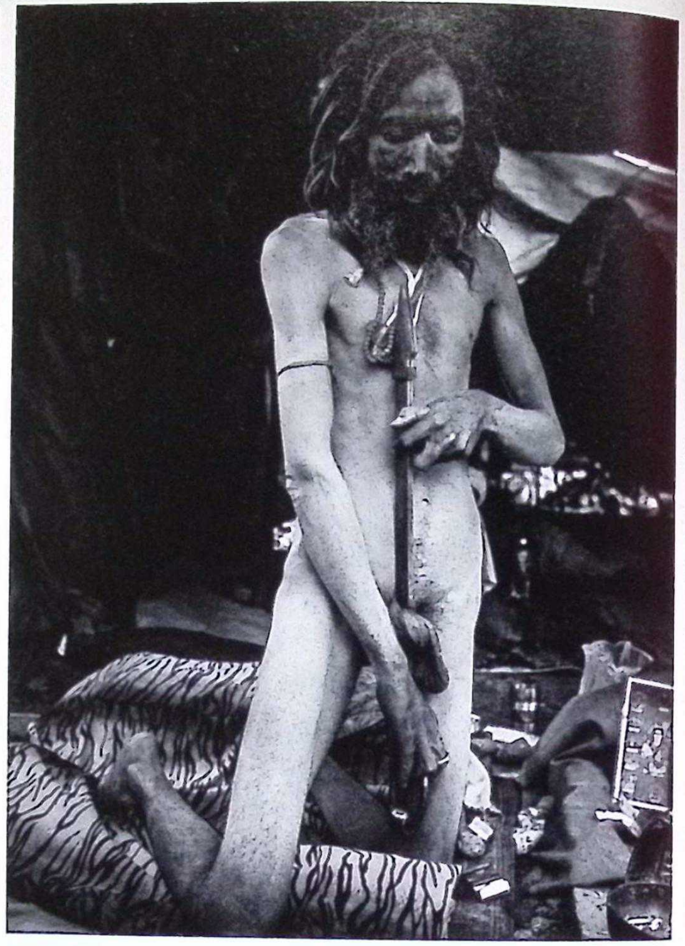


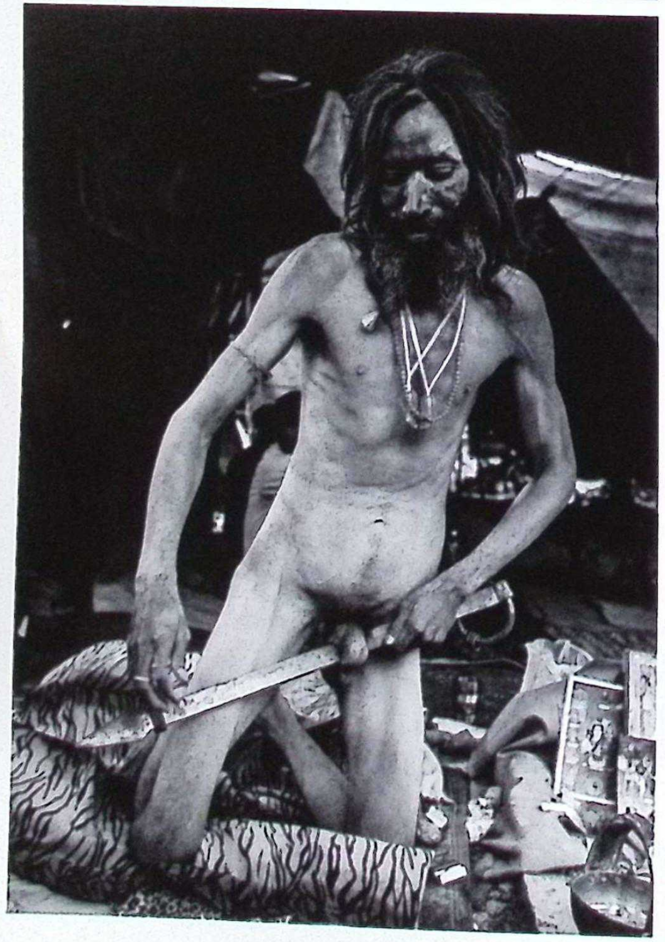


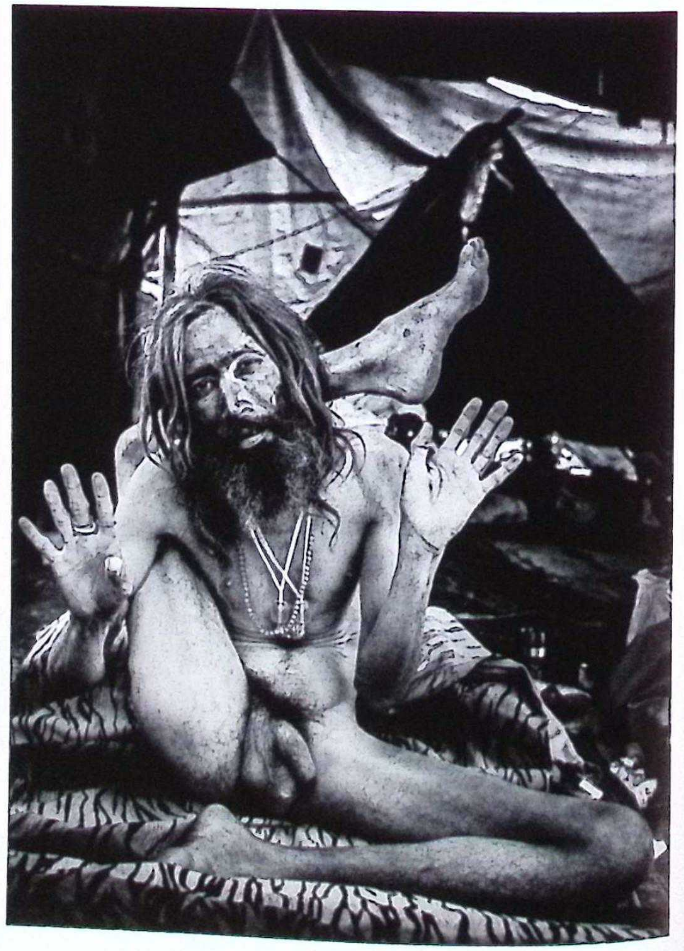


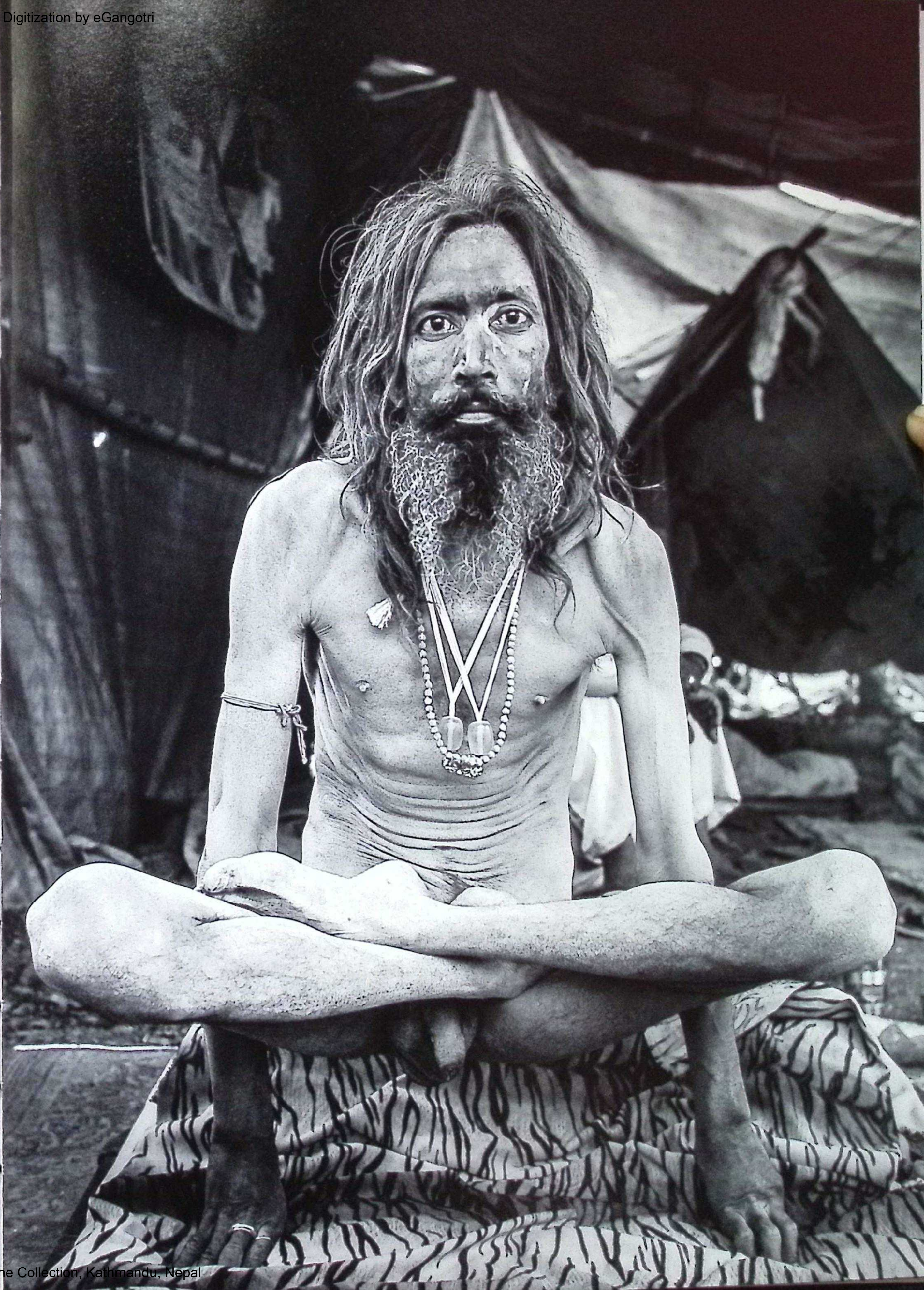












गिरि

"Now there is no hidden activity of mine which is unknown to you. Even though I conceal my activities, by the power of love, you [now] understand everything in detail. Guard it in secret and do not expose it anywhere as people will laugh at my mad activities. Indeed, I am a madman, and you are also a madman. Therefore you and I are in the same position." Caitanya to Rāmānanda Rāya

— *Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 8. 289-291*

Against The Grain is full of over-simplistic generalisations, but the underlying picture of these manifold traditions are more or less as I described them. Although I now will honour and thank many persons of outstanding learning and character, mistakes are, and remain, solely my own. This book, and everything relating to it, i.e., trips and field-research, materials, equipment, book production, consultations etc, have been nurtured by the kindness of many people and institutions without whom none of my undertakings would have been possible. Firstly and foremost I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Nainka's Endowment for Kashmiri Shaivism and Kashmiri Hindu Studies as well as the following scholarships I have received over the years: The Shri Amit Mishra, Okita, Gupta Dan and The Tristan Elby Bursary – all granted to me by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, equally important, I also would like to thank the Eaton Funding for their support. Also Kriton Krimitsos from Leica for having built me a customised 50mm lens from scratch. Secondly, yet equally important, I would like to offer my deepest respects to all deities, forces of nature (dark or otherwise) and all those who appear on the pages of this book – to all the sādhus, shamans and sādhakas who for so long have put up with me in various scenarios, whether by hosting me for several days on end, feeding me and keeping alive, answering my endless questions or simply for welcoming me into their universe. A special thank you to Aghorī Manikandan and his men, also to Jagadiśadās Mahātyagi, Śāstriji Bairagi, Rāmanarasiṃha Dāsa, the Nāth yogīns from Bhatṛhari's cave in Ujjain, Iśanāth from Paśupatināth, and the late Baba Kālīnāth Aghorī from Tilikot in Nepal who passed away while I prepared this volume. Also I would like to extend my gratitude to the following individuals: my father P. Simon Z"L, Dr. Bjarne Wernicke-Olesen, Prof. Gavin Flood, the late Prof. Tuvia Gelblum and family, Dr. Daniela Bevilacqua, Filip from Om Tatt Sat, Prof. Hugh Urban, Dave Evans AKA Cityzenkane, Haroob Mulik, Dr. Bruno Pires, Alexandra Elbakyan, Tanja and Irene Jakobsen, Helene Svarre Christensen, Daniel Oliveira, Prof. Chris Dorsett, Jux Curtis, Ishtan Sparrow, Vinod Vasu, Sofia Dawe, David Woodford from MW Classic, Prof. Mans Broo, Shaunaka Rishi, Dr. Lucian Wong, Prof. Renate Sohnen-Thieme, Dr. Alan Herbert, Dr. Silje L. Einarsen, Daniel Higgs, Adam Curtis, Firozeji “the only Muslim Aghori” from Mumbai, the Mulepati family from Nepal, Rev. Anders Blækfyldt, Prof. Sthaneswar Timalsina, Gitte Poulsen, Richard Singh, Dr. Rajan Khatiwoda, Iman Al-Sayad, Rabbi Geoffrey Cohen, Commander Nestor Makhno, Sharon Rudy, Guy St Amant, Swami Bijay Puri from Aavahan Akhara, Padma Rafferty, Rabbi Fluffy Me'ow and you for having supported this book.

Prema Goet is an artist and a multi-disciplinary researcher whose main interest lies in the intellectual history, culture and languages of South Asia. He received a BA in Sanskrit and MA in Philosophy and Religion from The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He is currently a researcher in visual-anthropology for The Śākta Traditions Research Programme at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. His interest focuses mainly on the performative ritual practices of various ascetic groups of South Asia. He has extensively worked with various practitioners from the region (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Chinese occupied Tibet), documenting and producing a vast array of ethnographic works on tantric rituals, worship of the Goddess(es), aghora and yogic practices. Amongst other things, Prema has also produced and recorded various audio-tracks of traditional chantings and music performed by the various groups he has worked with. His 2019 exhibition at the OCHS, The Path of Śakti, was curated and introduced by Prof. Chris Dorsett from The Pitt Rivers Museum.

"Often assuming the polarities of the observer and the observed by extending the dichotomy of subject and object, cultural subjects have been dissected and studied in the imperial laboratories of cultural anthropology where written words have always claimed the throne. Prema Goet confronts this mainstream model with images that leaves one perplexed, wondering, elated, cringing, or speechless. Every image Prema has assembled speaks for its own unique time and place, compelling the readers to recognize the power of visual anthropology. Masterful collection that reflects an astute vision, a genuinely praiseworthy and enjoyable endeavour!"

— Prof. Sthaneshwar Timalsina, San Diego State University

"This book is a fascinating journey into an unusual world. In bringing into sharp relief through a series of wonderful photographs, Prema Goet has shown how these traditions that go against the grain are still a living and vibrant way of life."

— Prof. Gavin Flood, Oxford University

"Severe Friendship piercing the larval surfaces of the Incarnation Station... pupils strobe through revolving doors of realities happening... magnetism shared through glances embalmed in panoptic light & shadow, zolv-quagging in a mirrored bowl... corpus rhymes with tutelary mayhems of inner church-circus...to endure infinite Joy."

— Daniel Higgs, author of Warp of the Witch Rug